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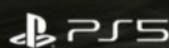


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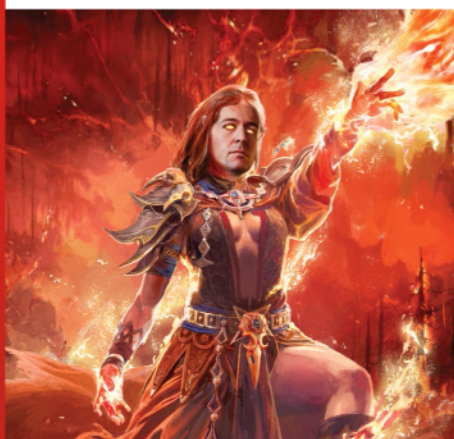
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"PATH OF EXILE II FEELS EXCITINGLY FRESH AND CONFIDENT"



We loved the original *Path of Exile* here at PC Gamer. We described it as a 'brilliant, sprawling action RPG that keeps changing'. And, after flying to Grinding Gear Games' headquarters in Auckland, New Zealand, to play its much-anticipated sequel, that quality and commitment to pioneering change is alive and well.

ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rmicholasj

This month

Joined the Brotherhood of Nod. After ascending its ranks to the position of aide-de-camp, was tasked with polishing Kane's head. Wax on, wax off.

From what we've seen, *Path of Exile II* feels excitingly fresh and confident in its ARGP skin, with GGG not afraid to evolve its formula to deliver even more fun and immersion for PC gamers. *Diablo IV* should be worried.

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

Twitter

@robinvalentine

This month

Contemplated a question that has long plagued Indiana Jones fans. Would Indy eat a whole lemon?

**IAN EVENDEN**

Twitter

@ieunden

This month

Ran around PC Gamer Towers throwing a big red ball at people. Oh, and in *Little Big Adventure* he...

**LAUREN MORTON**

Twitter

@ComradeCupcake_

This month

Married a bin man in cosy sim game *Tiny Life*. Their honeymoon was rubbish. Get it?

**HARVEY RANDALL**

Twitter

@HJRwithpen

This month

Instructed the team in how to blast cockney elves off high buildings. Essential to know.

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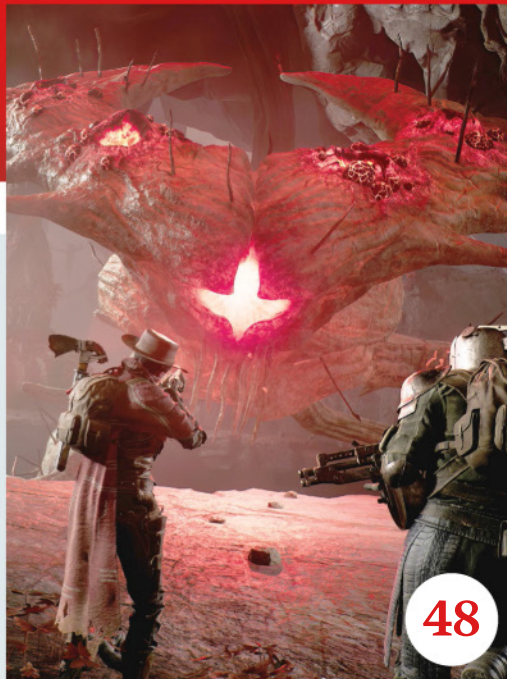
Dominic Tarason flies to Grinding Gear Games' HQ in Auckland, New Zealand, to go hands-on with the thrilling new action RPG that is coming for *Diablo's* throne.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



OWNED BY STEAM

VALVE cordially reminds you that your games aren't yours

Steam has made a little change to its shopping cart page: a new message that very clearly lays out to one and all that you're not buying a game – you're buying a licence.

The message itself is brief, "A purchase of a digital product grants a license for the product on Steam". A link to the full Steam Subscriber Agreement is also provided. The change follows Valve modifying its subscriber agreement last month to remove a forced arbitration clause.

Of course, for practical purposes, all you need to do is forget your

Steam password to get a real sense of just how much you 'own' your games. You can't bequeath your Steam library to anyone upon your unfortunate passing either, which of course you would be able to if you really owned its contents.

Conversations about whether anyone actually 'owns' their games

have been going on for years: a Hacker News forum thread from 2012, for instance, warns users to read the Steam subscriber agreement carefully because software purchased through the storefront is licensed, not owned.

"As nice as Steam is to use, being able to download software on any computer in a fairly simplistic manner and to get reduced prices from time to time, I'm not convinced that giving up the right to own things you purchase is a fair price for that convenience," wrote a user in a message that feels like it came from about 100 years ago.

**THE DIGITAL
GAMES THEY BUY
CAN BE TAKEN
AWAY AT ANY TIME**

FUS RO DAME

GRAN STOPS GAMING



Shirley Curry, more affectionately known as The Skyrim Grandma, is hanging up her gaming video gauntlets. The 88-year-old told fans that she was “bored to death” with content creation, adding, “I’m just doing it for fun, and it isn’t fun anymore”. Fear not, she’s posting non-gaming vlogs. ■ **MT**

EMULATE THIS

NINTENDO CAUGHT OUT?



After years of bashing emulation of its games, a video has surfaced that seems to show Nintendo emulating *Super Mario World* on Windows at the official Nintendo Museum in Japan. Oops! So much for emulation “stifling innovation”, as Nintendo previously claimed. ■ **JF**

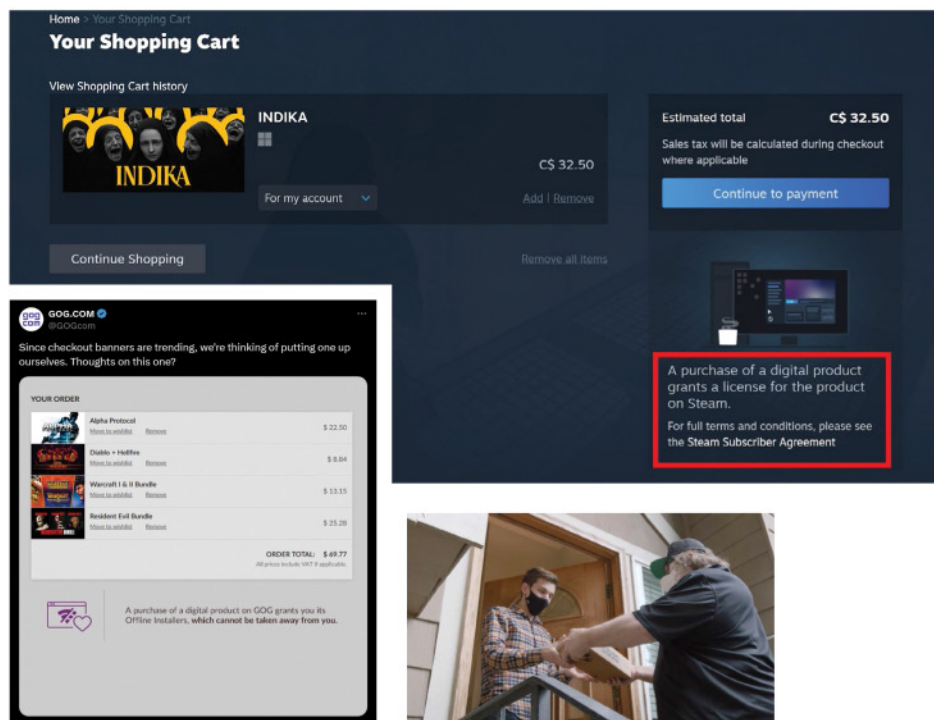


MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS



Bruce Nesmith, a Bethesda veteran and former *Skyrim* lead designer, said what we’ve all been thinking: it’ll be almost impossible for *Elder Scrolls VI* to live up to fan expectations. “Marketing departments just put their heads in their hands and weep at this.” Anything less than perfection will spell failure. ■ **EG**



TOP: The message in question (the highlight is ours).

ABOVE: GOG went right in for the kill on social media.

NO CREW

So if the absence of ownership on Steam isn’t new, why the new message? My assumption is that it arises from recent pushback against game publishers ending support for online games, and in some cases revoking the licences to those games outright. That too is nothing particularly new, but Ubisoft broke the camel’s back earlier this year when it ended services for *The Crew* and stripped the licence from people who had purchased it. That sparked a consumer campaign and, more pointedly, a new California law that requires retailers to warn consumers that the digital games they buy can be taken away at any time – as this message does.

The law only applies in California, but other states and countries could (and, I would guess, will) embrace similar laws of their own. Given that, and the hassles of complying with regulations on a granular, state-by-state basis, it makes sense that Valve would take the simplest approach here: blast this message to everyone and be done with it. It won’t do anything to keep your games from being taken away from you, but it does provide a layer of legal cover for the companies taking them.

And given the great convenience of Steam, isn’t that all that really matters? ■ **Andy Chalk**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Finally redeemed

Red Dead Redemption is finally hitting PC, 14 years after its initial launch.

Well AI never

Activision claims a 43% drop in ‘disruptive voice chat’ in *COD* thanks to its robo-snitch.

Infernal union

Cult of the Lamb built a replica of the Lamb’s temple and officiated two actual weddings at PAX Australia.

Nintendon’t

Switch emulator Ryujinx has shut its doors after Nintendo “offered an agreement” it couldn’t refuse.

Power word: Stop

Baldur’s Gate III’s publishing director has implored scalpers to pack it in as they ruin the collectors’ edition for everyone.

Bad influence

An influencer wrecked a \$200K car on livestream, then asked his bleeding passenger to keep recording.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has never kept anyone waiting. Quite the opposite. The Spy is always there ahead of time, tracking, observing. A reflection in a shop window. A chill at your back in the train station. Didn't that server at McDonald's look strangely familiar to you? It is too late; The Spy is gone. Enjoy your McRib.

The Spy cannot say the same of some competitors. Take, for instance, the famous Messrs Snake: both Naked and Solid (ahem). They, rather unprofessionally, have been keeping people waiting since 1987. At first: three years between *Metal Gear* the first and *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake*, a project invented largely because Hideo Kojima caught wind that someone had made a different sequel without him: the little-loved *Snow's Revenge*, starring Solid Snake and his comrades John Turner and Nick Myers, both doomed.

Kojima-san decided he'd be damned if he'd let someone make a *Metal Gear* name with character names as sterile as 'Nick Myers' and, well, the rest is history. The Spy knew Nick Myers. Good man. Super dead, though.

Metal Gear game releases thereafter alternated between randomness and predictability with all the gusto of budget airline departure times. An eight-year wait for *Metal Gear Solid*, another three years for the second game, five years for the fifth. Kojima could not be rushed. You might think then, reader, that Kojima's absence from upcoming *Metal Gears* like the remake of 3 – *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* – might mean players can expect that game to keep its promised release date of sometime this year.

The Spy gives a wry smile to such suppositions. Rumours have been swirling about *Delta*'s release date ever since *Delta* was announced, with most settling on November 17, the 20th anniversary of *MGS3*'s original release, as the most likely candidate for *Delta*'s own maiden voyage.

But November 17 drifts ever-closer, and still no announcement from Konami. What's more, The Spy has picked up talk that the build the publisher was showing off in August ran a little stuttery. Does that sound like a game set for an imminent release to you?



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

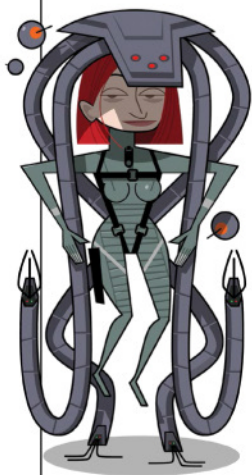
And yet one potential release excites The Spy even more than the lamentably tardy *Delta*. With the first volume of the *Metal Gear Solid Master Collection* now in a mostly acceptable state, thoughts turn to a surely inevitable volume two. In interviews with the series' current head honcho Noriaki Okamura, journalists (a kind of spy that works for little pay) have been needling him with questions about the possibility of freeing *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* from its PS3 prison, where it has languished unported for 16 years.

Okamura's evasive answers would frustrate even the steeliest GRU interrogator, but there is some evidence to piece together. Curious code-tinkerers uncovered references to *MGS4* on Konami's *Master*

Collection website last year, and as for Okamura? He told interviewers they could "probably connect the dots" about the game's appearance in volume two in a slippery August chat. Unless Okamura is pulling a fast one on fans worthy of Kojima himself, those dots spell out 'Old Snake on PC'. Spy out. ■

The Spy

ONE RELEASE EXCITES THE SPY EVEN MORE THAN THE TARDY DELTA



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

IZEL
(gasping)

You're dropped straight into Nahantu at the start of the campaign.

BUILDING SANCTUARY

A peek into how **DIABLO IV**'s hellish environments are made

Diablo is a game about puppeteering your little hero around and clicking monsters until they pop into piles of loot. It's easy to wrap your head around a loop like that. Blizzard designs both the piñata and the bat we hit it with. But it can be easy to forget just how much work goes into making you believe you're doing all of this in a dark gothic world with centuries of history.

Diablo IV probably reckons with this challenge more than its predecessors. Videogame open worlds are expected to be beautiful and navigable, especially ones where players expect everything to get out of their way as they massacre thousands of demons. The last thing you want to do is get lost on your way to finish a quest.

But *Vessel of Hatred*, *Diablo IV*'s first expansion, takes place in a jungle, the last place you'd go if you're trying not to get lost. You may have even seen this jungle before. In *Diablo II*, it was known as the Torajan Jungle, but in *Vessel of Hatred*, and retroactively to its natives, it's known as Nahantu. Blizzard couldn't just copy-paste the fuzzy vines and roots into *Diablo IV* though. Nahantu had to be updated for a game in 2024 with a slightly different tone. That started with looking back at *Diablo II* of course, art director Chris Ryder told PC

Gamer, but it also took a new direction inspired by works like *Heart of Darkness*: "We have way more reference material today than they ever did back with *Diablo II*," he says.

Working with the narrative team, the environment artists work out a general theme for the expansion. In this case, it's Mephisto's corruption of the jungle in the wake of Neyrelle, the young woman from the first game, bringing his trapped soul into Nahantu. At the start of the campaign, you can see the tar-like ooze that coats the leaves and monsters of the jungle, signs of the demon lord's lingering presence.

MEMORABLE JOURNEY

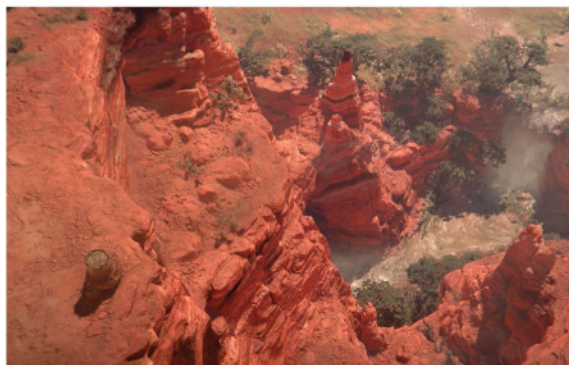
It's disgusting in that surreal, over-the-top *Diablo* way, and the designers were careful to contrast it with later areas, like a sun-baked canyon full of rabid animal warriors. "You want it to be a memorable journey through the world," Ryder says. "Even though we may not be talking explicitly about what's happening in the world, we're telling you a visual story."

Sometimes that means specifically setting the light just so for a cutscene where one of the leaders of the capital city rescues your character from drifting through the dangerous Nahantu rivers. Working with the narrative team requires a lot of iteration, lead game designer Rex



Hello Nahantu

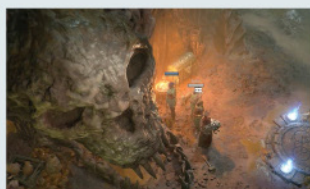
Nahantu was first seen in *Diablo II* and returns in *Vessel of Hatred*. It's a place once corrupted by Mephisto, one of the series' main villains. It's the home of a group of warriors who defend the spirit realm known as the spiritborn. In *Vessel of Hatred*'s campaign, you're tasked with cleaning out this haunted jungle once more.



FAR LEFT: The red rock canyon zone pushes the range of *Diablo*'s environments.

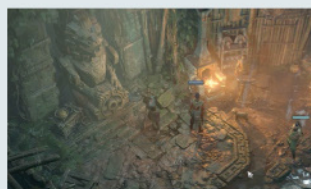
LEFT: Big demon skulls litter the Field of Giants.

BACK TO TOWN *The lovely little towns of Nahantu*



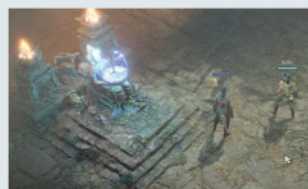
ICHORFALL

The remains of the dead colossals are prominent in the town of Ichorfall.



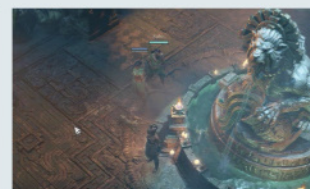
SAMUK

Samuk is on the western edge of Nahantu and is made up of overgrown cabins.



KURAST DOCKS

Diablo II players will remember this iconic town on the edge of the ocean.



KURAST BAZAAR

The capital city is a multi-layered one that's full of life.

Dickson tells me. Iteration that can even come from spending years building the original game regions.

"Specifically in Nahantu, we spent a lot of time talking about points-of-interest, these interesting little visual signatures," Dickson says. "And not all of them are fully supported by narrative or sidequests. Some of them you walk by and you're like, 'Ooh, what is this place?'"

PLANTING MYSTERIES

In that canyon region of Nahantu you'll quickly run into one of my favourite parts of the expansion: big demon bones. Rib cages big enough to live in – literally – and massive skulls that stare back at you as you explore the zone. The game doesn't explain all that much about where they came from, but you can tell they were once massive demons.

Ryder and Dickson are delighted to hear how much I love them, and how much they remind me of *Elden Ring*, a game that also has massive skeletons covered in mould. Dickson says this kind of 'invisible' storytelling exists all over the place: "Every character gets a backstory and the funny thing is like 90% of it probably won't appear in the game." That lore and backstory informs stuff like those massive bones.

Dickson says the colossus corpses are considered a "secondary story" to the canyon areas. They're not pivotal to the campaign and Mephisto's corruption, but they're vital to the history of the area. He says it was a very deliberate choice not to explain them, or even mention them, to players so that it's purely on them to wonder

what their deal is. "I like where it landed because there's a little bit of mystery and we're not filling in all the blanks for you, and you can sort of imagine your own story as to how this came to be."

EXPLAINED IN DETAIL

That said, the lore of those bones exists somewhere out there in a document, and maybe one day it will be explained in detail in the game, but Dickson is kind enough to give me a tease. "Thousands of years ago it was

Akarat – when he was alive – who led the armies out from Kurast to fight and take down these colossals and because they were demonic they wouldn't decompose," he says.

Akarat, if you didn't know, is kind of *Diablo*'s Jesus, a man who helped spread the faith in the light's restorative powers which eventually birthed the Zakarum church. The

Cathedral of Light that is central to the world of *Diablo IV* is the current iteration of that religion, and its roots are explored within the *Vessel of Hatred* campaign. You won't get more than that from me though; you'll have to play it yourself.

And I promise you it'll be worth it. *Vessel of Hatred* has some of the most striking environments in *Diablo IV*, pushing the game into colour palettes I never would have expected to see. And surprisingly it all still feels just as dark as the pits of hell from the previous games. Like those big demon bones, it'll stick with you for years and years to come. ■

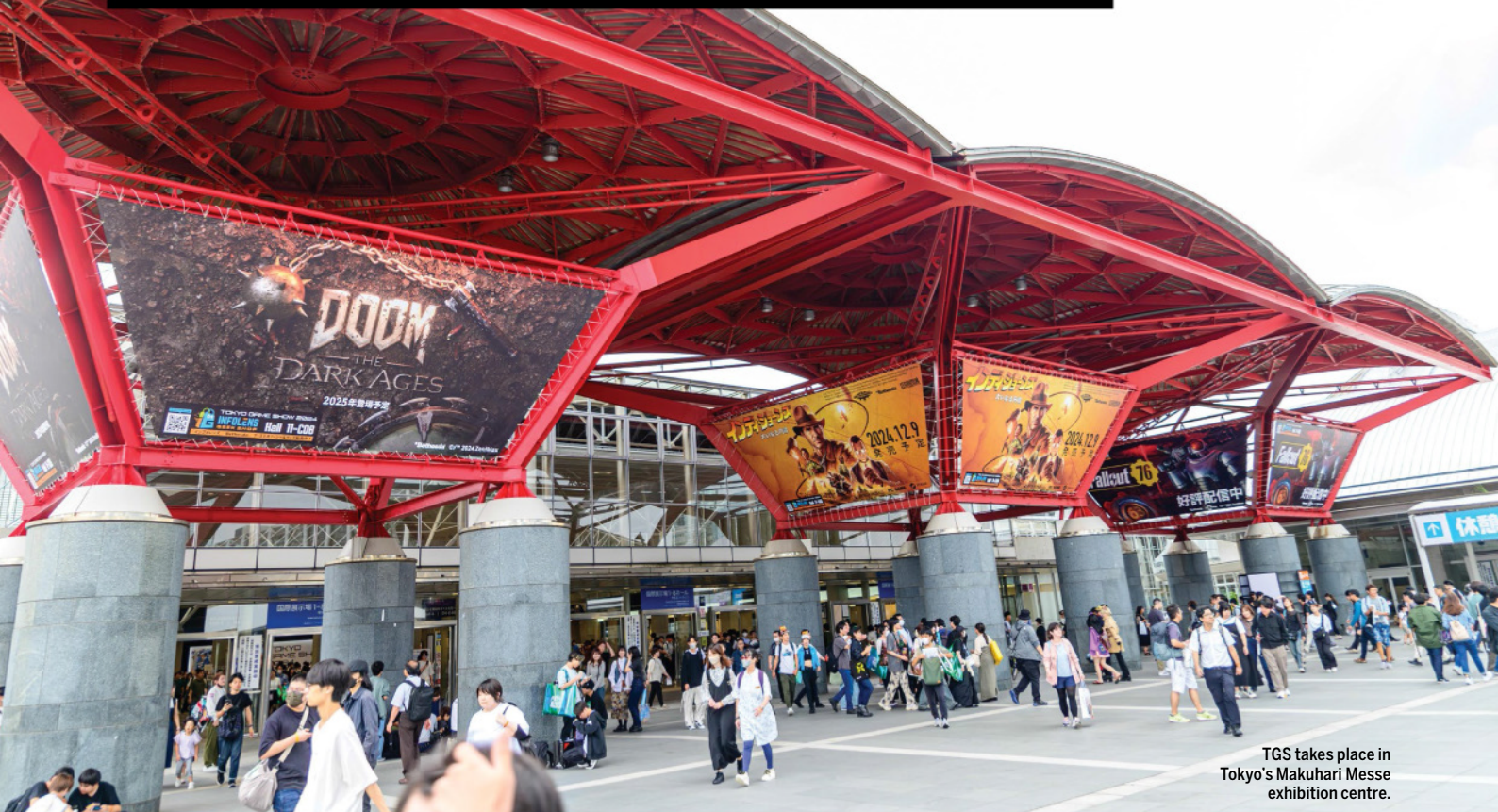
Tyler Colp

AKARAT, IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW, IS KIND OF DIABLO'S JESUS



Made in Japan

PC GAMING FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



TGS takes place in Tokyo's Makuhari Messe exhibition centre.

STAR ATTRACTION

PC gaming wins at this year's **TOKYO GAME SHOW**

The Tokyo Game Show 2024 was the biggest ever and, excitingly for PC gamers, it was PC gaming that was the clear winner, with Steam, PC GamePass and Windows logos everywhere. Thanks to the downfall of Sony PlayStation's exclusives policy, which has ruled the Japanese gaming industry for decades, Japanese publishers are now free to release their latest games on PC on day one, and that was very clear at TGS24. Capcom, Square Enix, SNK, Sega, Bandai Namco and more are free to embrace PC like never before.

For example, this year's biggest games at TGS included *Monster Hunter Wilds* (Capcom), *Metaphor: ReFantazio* (Sega),



DR MARCO ZANGIROLAMI
Marco hails from Rome, Italy, but can often be found roaming around Osaka's DenDen Town in search of retro Japanese PC gaming hardware to add to his impressive collection.

Fantasian: Neo Dimension (Square Enix), *Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero* (Bandai Namco) and *Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves* (SNK), and each one is releasing day one on PC. Konami, too,

JAPANESE PUBLISHERS ARE NOW FREE TO RELEASE ON PC ON DAY ONE

despite the departure of its enfant prodigè Hideo Kojima, a fact that has seen it slip somewhat into recovery mode, is focussed now on PC, too, with its *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* remake debuting on Steam.

And, speaking of recovery mode, despite record attendances at this year's TGS (274,739 people in just four days!), big publishers across the board seem to have halved their new game releases, in part due to skyrocketing costs (*Tekken 8*, for example, has reportedly cost three times what *Tekken 7* did), but this has not been a bad thing, as the quality of releases has gone up, with *Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero*, *Romancing Saga 2: Revenge of the Seven*, *Sonic X Shadow: Generations* and more well received.

Overall, then, a great year for PC gaming, with our beloved platform of choice front and centre of TGS, which is something that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. For PC Gamer's full day-by-day reporting on TGS24, follow the link below. ■ shorturl.at/287ds



SHINONOME ABYSS: THE MAIDEN EXORCIST

Produced by the Japanese indie studio Wodan, this spiritual sequel to a 1986 Taito arcade hit sees you step into the shoes of a miko (a Shinto shrine maiden) named Yono, who has to escape from a haunted mansion while purging evil mononoke spirits.

Replicating the same top-down view as the original arcade classic, Yono has to fight a number of Japanese yokai demons and ghouls, both with her own attacks and also by smartly using the environment to her advantage, such as causing foes to fall down pits.

Shinonome Abyss is being developed by Kenichi Iwao, the story writer of the iconic first *Resident Evil* game, and after two years in the cooker is launching on Steam imminently. ■



SLITTERHEAD

An interesting new game from Kenichiro Toyama, the creator of the seminal *Silent Hill* saga, and Akira Yamaoka, composer for *Silent Hill* and *Shadows of the Damned*, *Slitterhead* takes place in a fictionalised version of Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, and sees the player take the form of a Hyoki, a formless spirit that can possess others.

By possessing other beings, the Hyoki can then use them and their abilities to combat the titular Slitterheads, monstrous brain-devouring enemies that have taken over the walled city. This is done, primarily, with hack 'n' slash combat, with the Hyoki needing to swiftly jump between hosts to keep the upper hand and defeat the Slitterheads effectively.

Think *Ghostwire: Tokyo* crossed with Hitoshi Iwaaki's *Parasyte* manga. ■

SCRUBBING UP IN RURAL JAPAN

THE BATHHOUSE: RESTORED EDITION is fresh indie j-horror

Finally this month, we have *The Bathhouse: Restored Edition*, which is a ground-up remake by an underground Japanese indie studio, Chilla's Art, of the original game. In this new version, which is built in Unreal Engine, you play as a woman called Mania Akimura

who, fed up of the dead-end job she is in, decides to relocate to a rural location to work in a Japanese bathhouse. Naturally, all is not as it initially seems in the bathhouse, and soon Akimura starts to see strange goings-on. Short but memorable, the *Restored Edition* is out now on Steam. ■

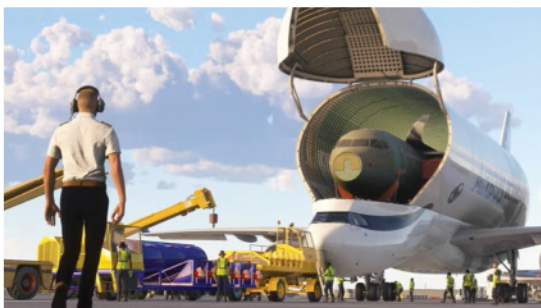


This guy seems happy to be at the bathhouse at least.



Yep, defo getting wholesome vibes from this place.

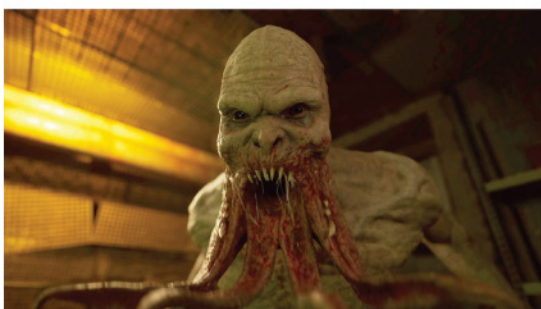
1 month



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2024

RELEASE November 19, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Asobo Studio

The latest iteration of the long-running and increasingly scarily accurate flight simulator promises new aircraft, flight modes, engine graphics and more.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE November 20, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

After many delays, the much-wanted survival-horror FPS is launching in the penultimate month of 2024. Explore and fight in a dystopian nuclear exclusion zone.



INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

RELEASE December 8, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Machine Games

Indy's back with a new whip-cracking adventure that is set between the events of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Hype!

2 months



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

RELEASE February 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The latest instalment in the long-running 4X strategy series, *Civ VII* lets you create kingdoms and rule as many legendary leaders throughout history.



ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

RELEASE February 14, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Quebec

Finally, the assassination sim series goes to Japan, with players stepping into the shoes of a samurai, Yasuke, and shinobi ninja Naoe. Slice and dice.



AVOWED

RELEASE February 18, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian

The anticipated first-person fantasy RPG that is definitely not like *Skyrim*. A small delay means *Skyrim* fans can now look forward to playing it in February 2025.

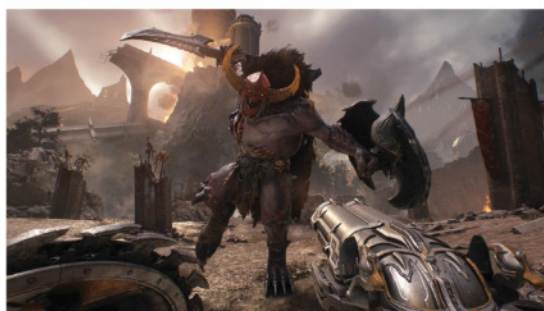
3 months



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Sandfall Interactive

Lead the members of Expedition 33 on their quest to destroy the Paintress so that she can never paint death again. Dark fantasy, turn-based RPG.



DOOM: THE DARK AGES

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER id Software

Doom goes historical, with the player stepping into the shoes of a living superweapon who fights in a hyper-violent medieval war against hell. Heavy metal guaranteed.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER The Chinese Room

Despite development troubles and multiple delays to its release date, we remain hopeful that this first-person World of Darkness RPG has proper fangs.

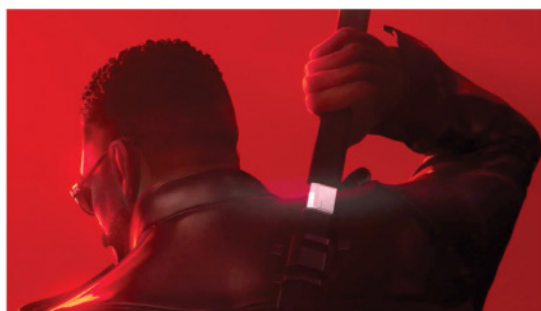
4 months+



FALLING FRONTIER

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Stutter Fox Studios

Conquer a vast, procedurally generated star system in this sci-fi RTS where gathering intel and ensuring efficient logistics are key factors to victory.



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.



GTA VI

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Don't hold your breath.

MOD

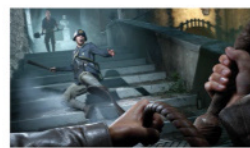
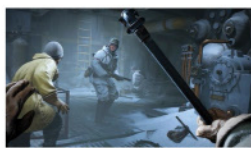
STARFIELD ND-5

I think it is fair to say that Vasco, your robot companion in *Starfield*, isn't exactly an all-timer NPC. So why not replace Vasco entirely with the far cooler robot from *Star Wars Outlaws*, ND-5? The new ND-5 Vasco Replacer mod by crossbow does exactly that, letting you explore the Settled Systems with a gun-toting badass droid by your side. You can grab the mod here: shorturl.at/8Fqzg



PREVIEW



Indiana Jones and the Great Circle

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

December 9, 2024

DEVELOPER

MachineGames

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

LINK

indianajones.bethesda.netINDIANA JONES
AND THE
GREAT CIRCLEIs MachineGames trying to
sneak a stealth game past us?

Shortly before my hands-on with *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*, a developer from MachineGames explains that this is “not action-adventure, but adventure-action”. He promises that this isn’t just a cinematic skin over the studio’s usual FPS combat, instead prioritising the feel of an Indiana Jones adventure. The problem is, I think that’s only half true.

As a statement of intent, it’s exactly what you’d want. It certainly wouldn’t feel true to the character if Jones was simply going room to room mowing down Nazis like BJ Blazkowicz. You want to see him bash some heads, for sure, but also exploring, escaping, outwitting and pulling off the impossible. The problem is, I don’t think what the studio’s made here really is “adventure-action”. After roughly three hours with it, I think it’s basically just a stealth game.

As my demo takes me from Marshall College to Vatican City to the Pyramids of Giza, more than anything what I’m doing is crouching behind boxes waiting for guards to pass. That’s not to say it’s bad or boring stealth – it’s mostly light and forgiving enough that you can make your way around fairly quickly, and cinematic touches give it extra spice. Stealth kills require a one-use weapon from the environment each time, meaning you’re breaking shovels, wine bottles, fire pokers and saucepans over Nazi’s heads. That’s just an old-fashioned good time.

IN VATICAN CITY, I SNEAK
THROUGH A FORTRESS TAKEN
OVER BY MUSSOLINI’S THUGS

When you do get spotted, it’s rarely a mission-ender. Guards seem happy to have a quick fistfight with you rather than running off to raise the alarm, using the simple but robust melee combat system. Despite their thunderous impact, your punches rarely attract wider attention, so once the guy in front of you is down, you’re free to go back to the shadows. Bullets flying is the only thing that’ll really bring down the entire Reich on you, and that’s easily avoided – use your whip to snap guns out of enemies’ hands, at which point they forget they ever had one and their lust for boxing takes over.

It’s a slightly chaotic and precarious kind of stealth, by design. I’m sure you can slink through Nazi bases like an unseen ghost if you really put the effort in, but it feels more natural to swing between effective sneaking and moments of panicked brawling. That evokes Jones’ scrappy, underdog nature – he’s not a ninja, he’s an improviser.

But equally I don’t think there’s a ton of meat here for those who do love a tense stealth experience. To support that cinematic feel, guards have been made about as intelligent as the heavy objects you frequently hit them with, and while there are elements of immersive sim design they’re all very light touch. That keeps things from getting too slow and cerebral, but when stealth is the core experience, I do worry that the systems here are a bit too shallow to stretch across a whole game.

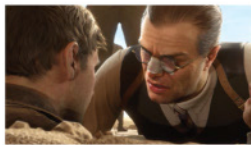
SNEAK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN

In Vatican City, I sneak through a fortress taken over by Mussolini’s thugs. Its cramped and relatively linear confines are ideal for both learning the stealth system and seeing it at its best, with secrets to discover, locked doors offering shortcuts if their keys can be found, and plenty of isolated guards waiting to be bonked on the head. It’s a short but satisfying sequence that leaves me curious to see how the formula widens out from there.

The next section I’m dropped into couldn’t be more different. The sprawling desert of Giza is one large, open map that I’m free to walk around as I please, with a smattering of different objectives encouraging me to find my own winding path through it. With Nazi camps dotted

PLAYED
IT

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle



☒ all around and patrols marching the sands, stealth is still key – but it's here that I see it at its weakest.

I do enjoy the increased agency and more organic feel – it's up to me where I want to sneak and how, rather than moving through a pre-set series of encounters. But the open spaces between camps are frustrating to traverse with lookouts always ready to spot you and nothing to hide behind, and the camps themselves don't feel well-crafted to encourage player creativity.

Once I discover a disguise, everything starts to make a lot more sense – suddenly I can simply walk past a lot of these guards, with only the occasional officer savvy enough to still see me as a threat. But it just means the friction of these open stealth encounters is replaced with... well, nothing. Empowering, but a little dull. The developer also has to point me directly towards the disguise before the session begins, to ensure I found it quickly – necessary, perhaps, for a press event where time is limited, but I do wonder how long I could have wandered frustrated without it otherwise, having to sneak everywhere across an entire desert.

Thankfully we don't have to find out. Instead, suitably dressed, I'm able to walk right into a Nazi dig site, and finally do something other than sneak. Down below the sands is an ancient Egyptian tomb ripe for exploring, and I've even got a plucky female sidekick joining me – now this is an Indiana Jones adventure!

BURIED

Sadly, this tomb-raiding sequence is less of a breath of fresh air (or dusty, underground air) than I'd hoped. It's strictly linear and scripted, leading me between extremely simple puzzles and quite awkward platforming sequences that keep popping me queasily into third-person to swing across a gap or hang off a ledge. The use of yellow paint splashed on walls and ledges in games to too show where to go is often lamented, but *The Great Circle* has the opposite problem – your next handhold or swing point often blends into the background, making it unclear how to progress.

At the same time, straying off the prescribed path or even just disrupting the exact series of actions your AI companion needs to carry out is instantly punished. In this instance, many of the rooms are swarming with scorpions that quickly sting you to death if you walk where you're not supposed to. That's made worse by the inclusion of a stamina bar that harshly limits your sprinting and climbing, adding an artificial tension to traversal.

There's no real sense of discovery or exploration, as found in the recent *Tomb Raider* trilogy, but equally this sequence isn't slick or cinematic enough to stand alongside the more constrained set-pieces of an *Uncharted*. The further *The Great Circle* strays from its core stealth formula, the more it seems to struggle with the actual mechanics of Jones' escapades.

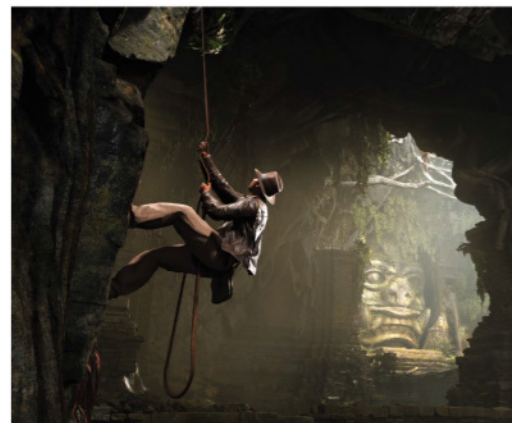
INDY DARLING

It's a shame, because while I don't think the game quite finds the adventure of the movies, it does a wonderful job recreating their look and sound. Environments are unbelievably lavish, and clearly painstakingly researched. Jones himself looks like he's stepped right out of the silver screen, and Troy Baker's impression of him is startlingly accurate at times.

The story weaves elegantly into the existing fabric of the series, using established characters in effective ways and introducing new ones that fit seamlessly in this cinematic world.

The movie part, then, is nailed – it's the videogame part that doesn't seem to quite click. If anything, the two seem to grind against each other, the wonderful realism of the cutscenes and environments making the more gamified elements more jarring. In one cutscene, I find myself touched by a moment when Jones greets an old friend and gives him an emotionally received gift. About ten minutes later, I'm discovering I can sprint for slightly longer if Jones steals lemons from the Nazis and eats them whole to boost his stamina. Maybe if he'd known that in *Raiders* he wouldn't have had so much trouble running away from that boulder? There's a lot about *The Great Circle* that's impressive, especially its visuals, and though its sneaking is uneven, its little moments of chaos give it a distinct and charming personality. But the feeling I can't shake is that I wish I was playing that adventure-action game MachineGames pitched, rather than the stealth game compromise it's actually making.

Robin Valentine



JONES HIMSELF LOOKS LIKE HE'S STEPPED RIGHT OUT OF THE SILVER SCREEN

Indiana Jones and the Great Circle

ABOVE: Dodging Nazi patrols everywhere you go in Giza is pretty tedious until you're able to disguise yourself as a local.

LEFT: Italian journalist Gina is Jones' new companion and (presumably) love interest. She's great fun except when she's dropping obvious puzzle hints.

PREVIEW

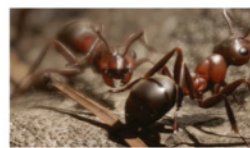
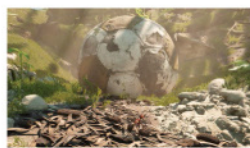
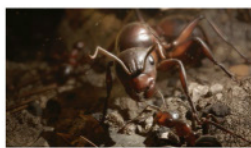
Empire of the Ants



ABOVE: Golden ants and blue beetles mean it's a colourful kind of warfare.

RIGHT: Fights can lead to huge numbers of creatures on screen.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 7

DEVELOPER
Tower Five

PUBLISHER
Microids

LINK
microids.com

EMPIRE OF THE ANTS

Deep in the forest, something is stirring

Giant ants have a long history in videogames, all the way back to 1989's Cinemaware classic *It Came From the Desert*, but while they may look gigantic, the ants in *Empire of the Ants* are normal sized. They're just very close, and packed with all the detail Unreal Engine 5 can manage.

So what you get are heads, thoraces and abdomens that are sharp down to the little hairs that protrude from them. Mandibles gnash and gape, legs skitter, antennae wave and slugs leave trails of slime. The tiny world is rendered with care, light bouncing off carapaces and the shadows of towering plants creating a contrasty place to explore – though there's a fair bit of repetition as swarms of ants and termites cover the screen.

This isn't the dev's first attempt at an ant game (based on the 1991 novel *Les Fourmis* by Bernard Werber). It created one before, also called *Empire of the Ants*, released in 2000 or 2001 depending on where you live. That game received average scores, garnering 62% from PCG UK and 56% from a less charitable PCG US, in which it was criticised for an unintuitive interface, hard to decipher menus and an illogical tech tree.

Empire 2024 is not that game, it takes less of a grand strategy approach and its interface is designed for a controller and melts into the background. Combat plays very much like Nintendo's *Pikmin*, as you send 'legions' of different ant types

(chunky soldiers, acid-spitting gunners, more general workers) against (in the demo version at least) enemy termites by selecting the group you want with the controller's bumper buttons, holding a trigger to target an area, and pulling the other trigger to send them on their way.

The demo version commits some minor but immediate sins. The first task is a timed escort mission, which nobody likes, in which you must protect a snail as it passes across multiple ant nests while under termite attack. Nests get objective markers, and the active one moves when you slide over your current target, but there's currently not much feedback upon completing an objective. All the while, termite hordes try to prevent the snail from moving as the timer ticks down and you release pheromones to speed up your legions, or make them more aggressive.

BRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES

Next comes a hunting mission, in which you're tasked with capturing three fireflies in a damp woody hole. The wet atmosphere and time of day affect things like power duration and gathering efficiency, and the hole itself is beautifully put together, with a deadly spider lurking behind its web and an orange slug patrolling back and forth on a branch. Getting the fireflies is a

trickier process, however. They're not easy to find – luckily they light up – and you'll have to explore thoroughly, then creep up on them and touch them before they fly away. Your ant, named 103,683rd, has no direct attack but can jump a long way, so you find yourself pinging around from mossy rock to gnarled stick. On touching the first firefly, it falls into the pool at the bottom of the hole, and water hurts your ant so you can't retrieve it. Happily, you get credit for 'capturing' it and move on to search for the other two.

In motion you do get the sense of a wildlife documentary from *Empire of the Ants*. A voiceover in the style of David Attenborough or Morgan Freeman would have concreted this, but the game is oddly quiet, the score a light backdrop rather than orchestral crash. There's no denying it looks amazing, however, a perspective on the forest floor setting that feels new after decades of top-down strategy.

Ian Evenden

YOUR ANT, NAMED 103,683RD, HAS NO DIRECT ATTACK BUT CAN JUMP A LONG WAY



Sadly, you don't ride this slug like a majestic steed.

PREVIEW

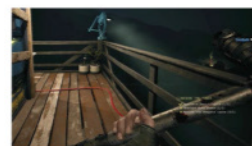
No More Room in Hell 2



ABOVE: These zombies are not having a good time.

RIGHT: Some weapons just feel cool to kill zombies with.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

October 22 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Torn Banner Studios

PUBLISHER

Torn Banner Studios

LINK

nmrih2.com

NO MORE ROOM IN HELL 2

A giant co-op zombie shooter that could rival the greats

As the zombie horde surrounded me just moments after taking down my two remaining teammates, the writing was really on the wall. Armed with just a kitchen knife, it was clear I stood no chance, but I was going down swinging, hoping for a miracle... it didn't come.

Being so close to success in the final area, after adventuring across the giant *No More Room In Hell 2* map for over 45 minutes, made the failure even more depressing. I'd finally managed to team up with a couple of other survivors, we'd looted a couple of locations such as an abandoned church and building yard to get some weapons that should have given us a good shot in the final stage, and then headed to the power plant at the centre of the map to try to complete the final objective.

But with just three of us out of a possible eight, and the fact we joined forces early on before we had properly looted the areas we spawned in, it meant we were always going to be up against it. We ran out of ammo mid-way through the final fight, and despite the zombies being reasonably slow, when a horde finds you in a confined area you're probably out of luck, unless you're packing some explosives.

"The final showdown in the control room, trying to reboot the power plant, is really challenging and the team needs to be prepared for it," says game director Leif Walter. "Players have control over how

quickly they move into the plant and how early they take on this big challenge, and they can decide how much they want to stock up on explosives, ammo, or barricade boards."

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Despite falling so close to the end, which was gutting, I'm still thinking about epic moments from that run days later. Climbing up a giant crane and hoping my teammates could hold off the zombies at the bottom so they wouldn't then block my only route back down, throwing a pipe bomb off the balcony of a church and sprinting through a burning forest with trees falling down around me were all cool moments, and I still feel like I've only explored a fraction of the map.

"The range of experience that the game provides, and the journey players go through, was really important for us," says Walter. "Starting alone in the outskirts of the map, equipped only with a rusty pipe, creeping through forests and deserted highways, surviving your first zombie encounters. To meeting more players, gearing up, and down to the final showdown in the industrial environment of the power plant, equipped with assault rifles and explosives, where the game takes a more action-focused tone for the last moments."

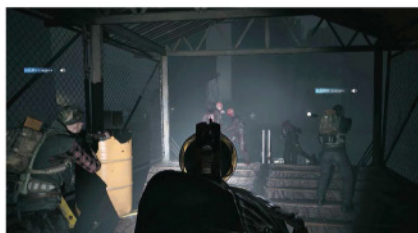
I wonder how long those moments will keep delivering, as you can only experience them for the first time once, but the good news is that just running around killing zombies is fun. Whether you are bonking them on the head with a giant wrench, unloading a machine-gun in their direction or luring them into a proximity explosive, taking them down is satisfying. I expect, even after you've mastered the map and figured out how to do all the objectives, you'll still find enjoyment in just running around killing things.

More content is coming to *NMRIH2* throughout early access, and the roguelike elements of character skills and permadeath add some variety, so I doubt you'll ever have exactly the same experience twice. But the real star is going to be the other players you team up with, and with a good group of pals this could rival the best zombie co-op games ever.

Mike Stubbs

PLAYED IT

WHEN A HORDE FINDS YOU IN A CONFINED AREA, YOU'RE PROBABLY OUT OF LUCK



This zombie is about to get a lot uglier.

PREVIEW

Bonaparte: A Mechanized Revolution



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Q1 2025

DEVELOPER
Studio Imugi

PUBLISHER
Studio Imugi

LINK
bonapartegame.com

BONAPARTE: A MECHANIZED REVOLUTION

Big robots match big personalities in revolutionary France

At this point, 'history but with mechs' is a staple genre. For upcoming tactics game *Bonaparte: A Mechanized Revolution*, it's a pretty functional conceit: it lets the developers use big historical personalities as frontline warriors on a tactical grid with less concern for their historical job, which was to stay away from flying bullets.

It lets *Bonaparte* focus on the big personalities of the (alternate, yet familiar) history here, and have principled conversations about The Nature and Rights of Man or The Future of the French State on the battlefield from giant robots, rather than in dimly-lit rooms. It also helps that your Bonaparte – Céline or César – is a blank slate you can characterise.

Bonaparte's tactics are pretty straightforward: simpler than something like *XCOM* or *Fire Emblem*. Your units move and attack each turn, or forgo that attack for a second move or special ability – like a cavalry charge or rallying morale. Each unit has facing, either toward the left or right of the screen, and can't automatically fight back if approached from the other direction.

To win battles you want to attack from their flanks while preserving your own. You'll sometimes get neat Napoleonic-looking battle lines of troops, but eventually skirmishes will collapse into chaotic positioning-based melees. The

complication there is your units' morale, which makes them take more or less damage as it falls and rises.

The demo I played had a handful of unit types that each had clearly defined roles. At its most basic were the two infantry units, the Militia and the Line Infantry. Weak Militia are armed with pikes – but are the people your soldiers fight for and can inspire your other troops. Line Infantry are the core of your army, blocks of troops with high hit points, best served by lining up and firing directly at the enemy in true Napoleonic fashion.

From there you have Skirmishers, who can harass Line Infantry without being fired back on. There are also Hussars, cavalry who get behind the enemy and deal devastating flanking attacks. And finally cannons: fragile, long-ranged and very effective at devastating enemies.

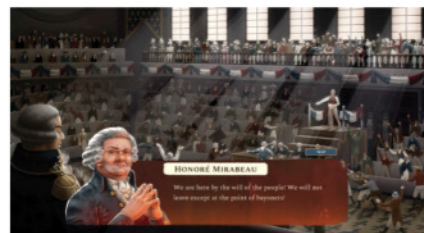
VIVE LA RÉVOLUTION

The last kind of unit you'll use is the Colossus, a steam-and-phlogiston powered mech piloted by your hero Leader characters. Colossi have huge hit point pools, but have to carefully manage their heat. One action per round is fine, but once you start attacking and firing their cannon-sized pistols their heat rises, and they can only vent it so quickly. Your Colossi are a weapon to be carefully used in bursts to knock out key enemies before they themselves burn out.

Battles show up because you've sent armies around France to capture territory, fight enemy factions, or undertake missions. Your Bonaparte can side with the radicals, moderate and royalist factions of the revolution – promising three different campaign stories of the revolution, a constitutional monarchy compromise, or a full-on siding with Louis XVI's "L'État, c'est moi" attitude.

The Leaders include characters like Bonaparte's best bro Joachim Murat. Each Leader has their own statistics and loyalties to your cause or its allied philosophies. I think a lot of people would be really interested in the politics of playing factions against each other in order to build their very own revolution-winning coalition. We'll see if that promise delivers in 2025.

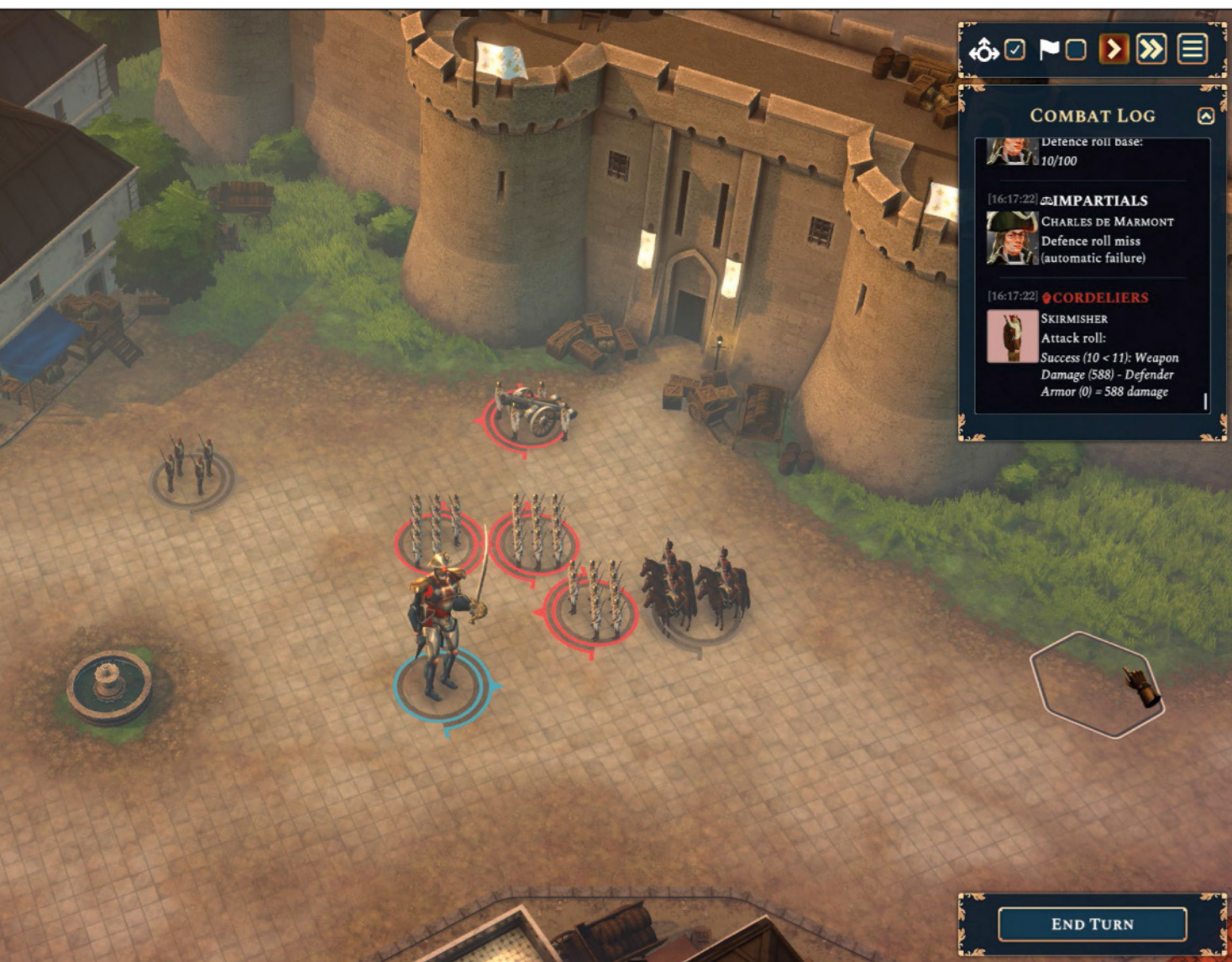
Jonathan Bolding



Using cannons on civilians means you're the bad guys, probably.



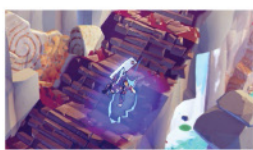
**TO WIN BATTLES YOU WANT TO
ATTACK FROM THEIR FLANKS
WHILE PRESERVING YOUR OWN**



ABOVE: Storm the Bastille, but with a steam-mech.

LEFT: Build up loyal territories for long-term gain.

Windblown



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

October 24 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Motion Twin

PUBLISHER

Motion Twin, Kepler Interactive

LINK

windblown.game

WINDBLOWN

Dead Cells dev's new roguelike has me afraid for my free time

Everything in *Windblown* happens in a blink. The lightning-quick dash barely has a cooldown. Time only slows for milliseconds when you dodge just as an enemy's swing is about to connect. Downtime is in short supply, and the exhilarating flow state needed to survive *Windblown* had me thinking half a dozen inputs in advance.

My favourite expression of this is the game's alterattacks – special combos that only activate after you've swung a few times with one weapon and then immediately switch to another. There's a rhythm particular to each weapon, but the results are often explosive. I picked up throwing knives that mark enemies with a stacking debuff I could detonate for big damage. However, the knives themselves don't do a ton of damage, so I quickly learned I could risk my neck up close with a high-damage melee weapon, using the knives' alterattack for an influx of stacks, seamlessly capitalising on the strengths of both weapons in tandem.

On the flipside, I could poke an enemy from afar with the knives and then use a melee weapon's alterattack to cleave anything that got too close. The difference between using these moves and just switching to your other weapon's main combo is counted in milliseconds, but milliseconds tend to be the difference between securing a slew of new unlocks and a boot back to the beginning. The purity of *Windblown*'s

PLAYED IT

action is hard to overstate. Compared to its predecessor *Dead Cells*, it's less rogue-vania and more like a multiplayer *Hades* someone left on fast-forward.

Windblown rewards the player handsomely for leveraging little synergies in the heat of the moment, and as you unlock more upgrades, items, and extra weapons, your damage output will quickly snowball out of control. In my experience so far, the most powerful buffs are almost always active and intentional; extra damage after dashing through someone, marks and debuffs to apply, tight windows of increased damage, that sort of thing.

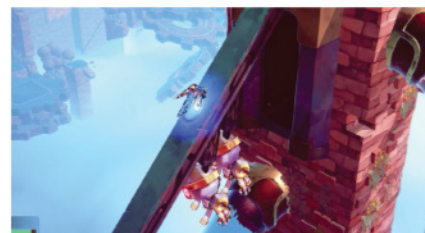
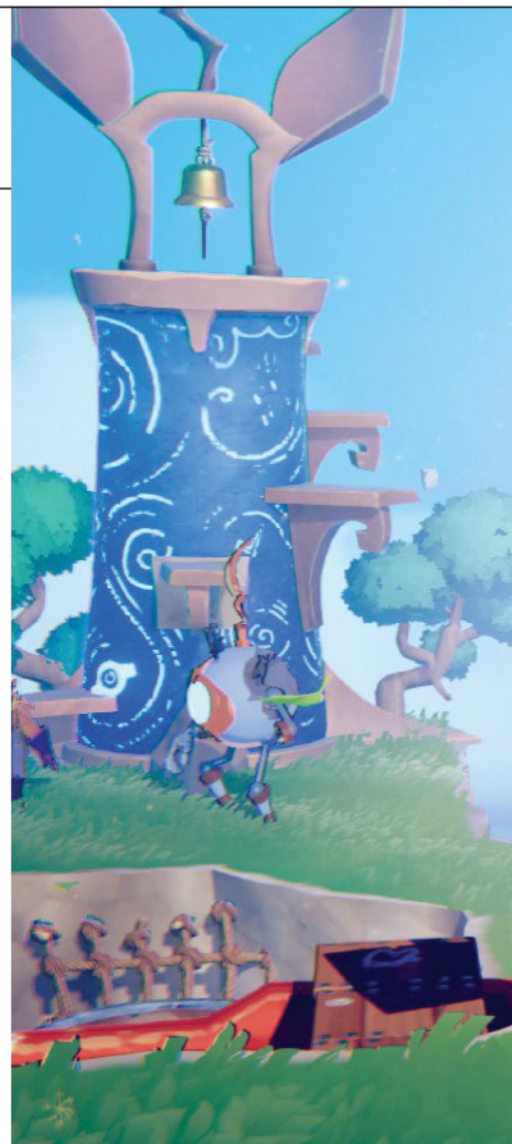
SUCCESSFUL RUNS

I find in other roguelikes my most successful runs involve a build so busted and self-compounding that I don't really have to think anymore. In *Risk of Rain* part of the fun is stacking so many ukuleles you can fry a whole map just by stepping foot in it. But here, the escalation of power came with an escalation of tension, since I had to actively manage to make my kit sing.

Darting around in a sea of enemy telegraphs, hitting the timing on my crossbow's rhythm-based attack, remembering to proc a backstab with my melee katars, using both my items whenever they're available, executing enemies just as they reach low health to squeeze extra loot out of them – with every run you develop an increasingly involved dance based on your item choices, and clever buildcraft doesn't deprive you of a second of that pulse-pounding action. Death is always only a few mistimed dodges away, and if you want to refill that health flask, you'll have to forgo a shiny weapon or two.

The game's most exciting feature, which could keep it in my regular rotation for years, is three-player co-op. *Windblown* might not have *Hades*' meticulous narrative or *Dead Cells*' years of content, but the prospect of digging into that 'just one more run' dopamine injection with friends has me excited already. My first taste of *Windblown* was like a nice sangria. Bold and punchy, with enough under the surface that I'm eager to keep lading – or maybe just dunk my whole head in the punch bowl.

Justin Wagner



Bosses are absolutely no joke, even in co-op.

WITH EVERY RUN YOU DEVELOP AN INCREASINGLY INVOLVED DANCE BASED ON YOUR ITEMS



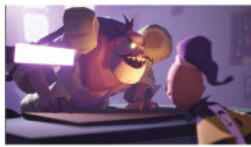
ABOVE: *Windblown* has a bit of a nautical thing going on.

LEFT: Blink and you'll miss the near-instant dash between floating island stepping stones.



PREVIEW

Little Big Adventure – Twinsen's Quest



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

November 14

DEVELOPER

[2.21]

PUBLISHER

Microids

LINK

littlebigadventure.com

LITTLE BIG ADVENTURE – TWINSEN'S QUEST

A fine-looking update for the classic PC game

Little Big Adventure (also known as *Relentless: Twinsen's Adventure*) is either the 38th best game ever (PC Gamer, 1997) or the 91st (GamesMaster, 1996). The 1994 release from French studio Adeline was a big hit in the days of interrupt requests and 8MB of RAM, and spawned a sequel and a more recent mobile port.

So what's new in this remake? The visuals have had a makeover, as has some of the music, but the big change is that it's a lot easier to start playing. MS-DOS was great, but clicking the Play button in Steam adds a new level of convenience for a game that was always on the player's side – it was a hard game, but also one of the first to use autosave.

The adventure is that of Twinsen, who lives on the planet Twinsun under the rule of a brutal dictator with a clone army. Twinsen has dreams about the end of the world, gets arrested, escapes, and goes on a quest to save his girlfriend that turns into a classic prophecy/chosen one/teleportation/dinosaur-riding narrative.

LITTLE BIG CHANGES

Cryptically named developer [2.21], based in Chantilly, France, has brought the adventure up to date with renewed graphics, which are light on fine detail but big on character just as in the 1994 release, and with a mix of music rearranged by the original composer and

new pieces. From the injustice of the game's new opening, which (in the demo version at least) replaces the story exposition of the original and sees a child menaced by a bad guy for playing with a ball. Twinsen gets arrested for sticking up for the girl, and lands in hospital-jail (the 'care facility') as a result, tormented by a nurse on a hovering platform who he quickly punches into a puff of smoke.

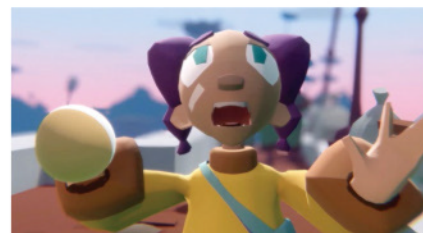
From there the demo moves into an escape from the oddly secure medical bay, helped by an autosave and a journal. The original game was noted for its difficulty, and little has been done here to change that. Get to the doctors before they hit the alarm button and summon elephantine troopers, punch medical staff to get keys, perform rolls to avoid capture and, inevitably, get caught and returned to your cell or the last checkpoint under the threat of being dissected.

It's all done with a large dollop of panache, especially in the voice acting (the delivery of the word 'troublemaker' and some of the French accents are particularly delicious) and after leaving the facility you're left to explore the chunkily rendered but extremely dangerous town outside, full of depressed hairdryer salesmen, guards who shoot on sight, vehicles that fire homing shots and snitches who'll raise the alarm. It's a superb graphical update, with the isometric viewpoint showing off the world while clouds cast shadows as they float by.

Eventually, Twinsen comes across a bouncy magic ball, which gives him a new outfit as well as the ability to throw it, taking out trigger-happy enemies with a few hits. It's reminiscent of the disc launcher in *Beyond Good and Evil* – an ostensibly rubbish weapon that can be effective against superior opposition if used in exactly the right way.

One thing that's not clear from the demo is whether *Little Big Adventure's* stances have survived the remake process. Twinsen could shift from normal mode into aggressive, sporty and stealthy stances, each changing the way he interacted with the world, and it will be interesting to see whether these have been retained in the final release, as they were a big part of the adventure's charm.

Ian Evenden



The graphics upgrade makes it look like a cosy life sim. It's not.

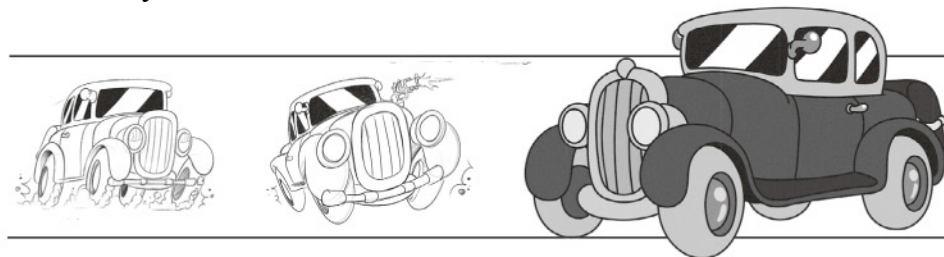


IT'S ALL DONE WITH A DOLLOP OF PANACHE, ESPECIALLY IN THE VOICE ACTING



ABOVE: There are plenty of characters to talk to, but their lines can get repetitive.

LEFT: Bouncy ball vs tank? The result may surprise you.

Mouse: PI for Hire

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Fumi GamesPUBLISHER
PlaySideLINK
playsidestudios.com

MOUSE: PI FOR HIRE

This mouse wants to be more than just a gimmick

In a hands-off presentation shown to me by lead producer Maciej Krzemien and CEO/game director Mateusz Michalak at Gamescom, I was able to see quite a hefty chunk of gameplay, as well as get a little insight into the development process behind *Mouse: PI for Hire*.

Fumi Games has a unique task put before it, after a video posted to TikTok by the game's lead programmer "went viral" as Krzemien explains. "It gained huge traction, like a huge amount of views, and back then, we already knew 'all right, people like this, we have something cool on our hands'."

The challenge, as both developers highlight, is making sure that *Mouse* stands on its own two rubber-hose legs. "Many people," Krzemien says, "upon seeing our game, tend to call it 'just a cool art project'. Others call it 'just another boomer shooter'. And we know where that comes from, obviously, because we are heavily focused on the art, we are heavily focused on all the key elements that make an FPS game fun."

However, the devs at Fumi Games have some lofty ambitions for the title, wanting to help it reach escape velocity and go from viral hit to a genuinely solid game. In case you're curious as to what *Mouse: PI for Hire* actually is, here's the elevator pitch as was given to me in a booth on a noisy Gamescom floor.

Mouse: PI for Hire is a Metroidvania first-person shooter – with an emphasis

on the Metroidvania part. There'll be movement upgrades, such as a helicopter glide and a grappling hook, as well as, "NPC interactions with their own questlines... some minigames, some detective elements and pretty adult, deep, gripping, dark storylines."

At first blush, the mention of adult storylines had me wondering if *Mouse* was just trying to be edgy with its legally-distinct visuals. A little unfair of me, but given Steamboat Willie entered the public domain to a tidal wave of horror indies that wanted to make use of the proto-mouse, not entirely unprompted.

HEAR THE MOUSE OUT

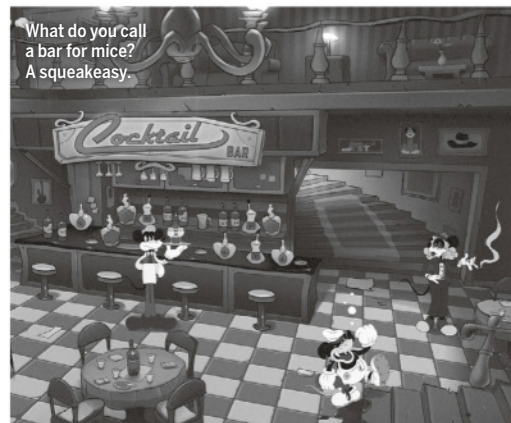
The more I'm shown their ideas, though, the more I have hope for something that actually uses its inspirations for some thoughtful satire. The game is set in the fictional city of Mouseberg in the 1930s after an economic crisis, and follows a World War I veteran named Jack. "We are not avoiding serious topics like political extremities, racial segregation, poverty, social inequality – in a way, *Mouse* is the dark, twisted reflection of 1950s America."

After the presentation, I asked Michalak about just how the studio'll be tackling those themes, "We are always looking to be very respectful with the themes that we are touching on, and some of them are pretty serious." The flavour of that discussion, he notes, will still have an element of satirical humour to it, "Basically, think of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*."

On paper, at least, I really like the idea. *Mouse* roots its visual style in 'rubber hose' animation, which had its start in the 1920s. Disney as a studio has several cartoons using the style in its vault, some featuring overtly racist caricatures and problematic themes reflective of the period in which they were made, so refusing to simply shy away from that entire discussion seems a solid, if ambitious, play on behalf of Fumi Games.

I am, genuinely, quite impressed with what I saw of *Mouse* and the enthusiasm buoying its developers – though with that enthusiasm comes a worry that the studio might be trying to bite off more than it can chew, given the clear impression I got that the game's scope has ballooned over time.

Harvey Randall



THE DEVS AT FUMI GAMES HAVE SOME LOFTY AMBITIONS FOR THE TITLE



ABOVE: Fumi Games has made an effort to improve its artwork over the course of *Mouse's* development – starting with its environments.

LEFT: Photos taken moments before disaster.

PC GAMER

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RETURN

K R N I N G N G

PATH OF EXILE II
promises spectacular
boss fights
and a massive
endgame even in
Early Access

By Dominic Tarason



LEFT: One of Act Three's hottest bosses, fought in a forge trench filling with molten gold.



T

he bad news is that *Path Of Exile II*'s Early Access debut won't be the full game, as initially hoped.

The good news is, even limited to half of the main story and six of the planned 12 classes, this is shaping up to be one of 2024's best action-RPG releases.

That's saying a lot, given that *PoEII* will be going up against a refreshed and expanded *Diablo IV*, as well as recent rivals like *Last Epoch* and *No Rest For The Wicked*. But with a dozen hours of a near-finished build under my belt, I'm confident in that assessment. With just weeks to go until the launch of Grinding Gear Games' ambitious ARPG sequel, I was invited to visit their offices in Auckland, New Zealand, to play the upcoming Early Access version and talk with the developers. After several fruitful chats with the game's lead designers and a deep dive into the mechanics of the new Monk and Mercenary classes, I've almost nothing but high hopes for the game.

When I last played *Path Of Exile II* at a press event in LA earlier this year, I had a blast, but it was arguably a little intense for most, geared to make both action-RPG fans and Soulslike players sweat. While still challenging (I died a half-dozen times), it feels like the difficulty curve has been smoothed out in this near-launch version, and the game now expresses itself better, making it more accessible to total newcomers, *Diablo* fans looking for something fresh and (obviously) *Path of Exile* devotees excited for the sequel.

One of the biggest mechanical changes to *PoEII* is how distinct the classes now feel. In the first game, they felt more like starting templates, nudging you towards play-styles, but the Monk and Mercenary gave me entirely different mechanical experiences, as well as having enough voice chatter to define them as characters, too. The majority of my play-time was as the Monk, a pious martial artist ascetic based around combo-heavy quarterstaff combat, and a focus on building and spending resources for area-of-effect attacks.

CARRY A BIG STICK

Unlike the Warrior, which I had played previously in LA (your classic sword-and-board fighter, heavily reliant on the new blocking mechanic), the Monk doesn't have much in the way of defensive options in the early game beyond well-

THE MONK DOESN'T HAVE MUCH IN THE WAY OF DEFENSIVE OPTIONS

timed dodge-rolls and killing enemies quickly. The good news is that playing your cards right can do absurd damage, with the Killing Palm skill letting you punch the souls out of weakened enemies, giving you an orbiting Power Charge. These are consumed by the Falling Thunder skill to fire a wide fan of powerful electrical arcs, capable of wiping out half a screen full of enemies in one hit or taking a solid 10-20% off a boss's health bar – a simple but always satisfying one-two punch.

Even more satisfying to pull off is the Tempest Bell skill. Hitting enemies with basic staff strikes (now upgradeable through support gems, meaning even basic melee remains

RIGHT: Act Three's finale is a trip through Aztec cyber-hell, rivers of blood pitch black in the gloom.



viable in *PoEII*) builds up the Combo resource. Fill it up, and you can channel Wukong to enlarge the ornamental bell on the end of your staff (there's no non-filthy way to say that, sorry) to massive size. Once placed, you've a few seconds to smack your bell with your staff (phrasing!) to send out concussive waves, damaging enemies, or casting elemental spells on the bell to spread their effects to nearby foes when you resume your drum-beat. It makes for a technical, very involved play-style, but it meant that there was seldom a dull moment through all of the first act – a feat few ARPGs can pull off.

The tail end of my time with the Monk saw me picking up a skill that made my dodge-rolls drop ghostly after-images that also conferred Power charges if destroyed, encouraging risky attack-baiting combat. And that was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of character building. I've not even seen what build-warping options the Monk's ascendancy sub-classes will offer, and I was only playing with the first eight of maybe 20 skills intended for the class. And of course, this being *Path of Exile*, there's nothing stopping you from picking a few abilities from other classes, too.

ASCETIC AESTHETICS

How to Monk

20% LOOTING
Even an ascetic needs to accessorise sometimes.

32% VIOLENCE
Reach heaven through hitting things with a big stick.



19% MUSIC
Hitting a big bell with a stick is also a form of violence.

17% TRANSUBSTANTIATION
Turning enemy souls into power charges.

12% METEOROLOGY
Predicting thunderstorms directly on your foes.

Path Of Exile II

 RUN AND GUN

While I spent less time with the Mercenary, I was genuinely impressed at how much just switching class made it feel like playing another game. Inspired by twin-stick shooters and playing great with *PoEII*'s slick new dual-analogue controller UI, the Mercenary's skills expand your loadout, giving you a variety of ammo types and fire-modes for your high-tech crossbow and its underslung grenade launcher. One mode behaves like a rapid-fire sub-machine gun, affecting enemies hit repeatedly with the Armor Break debuff. You can then switch to a sniper-like armour-piercing mode for one big hit that converts that armour break into a hefty chunk of extra damage, knockback and stun.

And of course, no good shooter would be without a shotgun. I'm still not quite sure how it makes sense as a projectile fired from a crossbow, but the spread-shot's combination of beefy up-close damage, the satisfying

'KER-CHUNK' as you load the next shot, and great potential to upgrade the skill into a room-sweeping blast of ricocheting flechettes with just a couple of support gems attached to the skill made this one an immediate winner. The developers told me that the Mercenary was probably the easiest class for new players to learn, and that felt about right. It's not without difficulty though, once bosses start breaking out their big area-of-effect attacks, forcing longer pauses between piling on the damage.

And of course there are some fun synergies going on here too. The shotgun-like fire mode does bonus damage against frozen enemies, so equipping frost grenades for your underslung launcher makes for an easy combo. It feels indicative of how *Path Of Exile II*'s classes work in general – each one has its own shenanigans that are immediately clear, and the skills offered early on will nudge players towards putting together intuitive attack combos. While the game does recommend you pick skills intended for your current class and level, indicating

which you should ideally use, there's also nothing stopping you from getting wacky and picking skills from any other class, especially as 'uncut' skill gems (letting you freely pick what skill they become) drop quite frequently as loot – one every few minutes during the second act.

So, character-building is intuitive, fun and fast, and the process of smashing monsters into loot-studded paste is satisfying too. But without a narrative hook or interesting places to go or monsters to slay, that could all be undermined. Fortunately *PoEII* is no slouch there either. While the first game's (extremely) haunted fantasy New Zealand was a fun setting, environments and enemies could blend together a bit, especially once you got to the remixed latter half of its massive ten-act campaign.

THE SHOTGUN-LIKE FIRE MODE DOES BONUS DAMAGE AGAINST FROZEN ENEMIES

ACTING ON INSTINCT

PoEII is aiming for a more reasonable six acts, but from what I've seen they're all beefy (clocking in at around nine to ten hours apiece for new players)

and very varied. The game takes players on a globe-trotting adventure, initially seeking revenge against a bloodthirsty Count in a very European region, hitting all those Hammer Horror tropes. Witches, werewolves, vampires, ghosts, druid circles, deep dark forests and high castle walls abound. But once the lord of the castle (who transforms into a half-man, half-gigawolf monstrosity mid-fight) is out for the Count, a larger quest to avert the apocalypse begins, with each successive act bringing an entirely fresh set of environments, channelling *Diablo II* at its best.

Act Two is desert-themed, with a mixture of ancient sandy ruins, open plains, cursed elephant boneyards and a battle across a web-like tangle of massive towers linked by bridges and walkways. Act Three takes players to the jungle and across time, as you investigate the ancient Aztec-inspired Vaal civilisation both in the present and in their past heyday. It's riffing on what we saw of their lands in the first game, but greatly expanded in scope.

ENEMY AT THE GATES

While swarming minions are hard to predict, bigger enemies tend to follow the same rules as bosses, with powerful, well-telegraphed swings. Be ready to dodge-roll.

GENERATION DREAD

Detailed and impressive as *PoEII*'s environments are, they're almost all procedurally generated. This hellish jungle is just one of over a hundred recombinant tile-sets.

STAFFING ISSUES

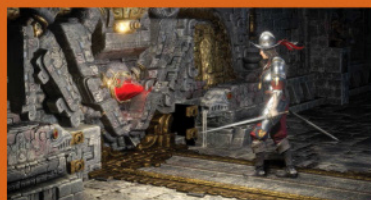
With no option to block, the quarterstaff makes the Monk a surprisingly aggressive class. Invest in some life-leech to keep up the aggro and pummel foes.

FULL SWING

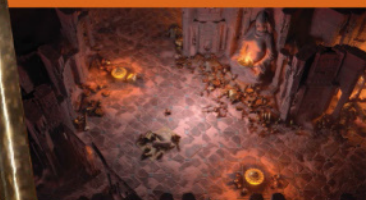
Melee swings do damage to anything you see the weapon hit. Add a couple of support gems and your zero-cost attacks can clean up large swarms of enemies.

COVER FEATURE

Path Of Exile II



LEFT: Alva the cheerful time-traveling conquistador returns to help in PoEII. You may not be the good guys here.



What I saw of Act Three was fascinating, as players get to battle through Vaal city streets in their prime, before draining a river basin in the present, uncovering the half-drowned and thoroughly mutated descendants of the city's people thousands of years later. The third act culminates in a battle through a spectacular Aztec-themed mad science lab complex, full of unsettlingly detailed vivisected corpses, cyborg monsters and deadly lasers – like a Mesoamerican take on *Quake 4*'s Strogg. And this trip through Vaal lands runs more than just skin deep – Act Three introduces some new gameplay mechanics, letting you corrupt your equipped items with Vaal magic to perhaps open up gem slots in them, letting you tweak their stats further with special blood crystals.

Acts Four through Six weren't available in the build I played, but I expect the first two to keep up this formula, each exploring a new part of the world and its cultures and monsters. As for Act Six, all the information I could wring out of Grinding Gear is that it'll clock in at around half the length of previous acts, but will crank up the stakes, spectacle, and be more than a little apocalyptic. Hardly surprising, given

that this is *Path of Exile*, but I'm still eager to see what kind of hell I get to inadvertently unleash on the world.

BIG GAME HUNTING

While the acts and their multitude of procedurally generated environments are impressive enough, and the sheer variety of basic enemies is higher than genre average, what really blew me away are the bosses. By the time the game leaves Early Access, Grinding Gear plans for there to be over 100 major boss battles in the game, none of them repeated, and all of them being multi-phase set-piece encounters. A figure that even puts *Elden Ring* to shame, once you trim out its many repeated or remixed fights.

They're a beautifully varied set of encounters, from the aforementioned Count and his gnarly monster-wolf form to an Aztec-styled guard captain that you have to fight in a shifting ring of spear-and-shield wielding soldiers that contract or thrust at you at their commander's barked orders. The multi-armed skeleton construct that you fight high above the desert sands midway through Act Two could pass for a final battle in most other RPGs, so having it be just a bump on the road highlights just how hard the devs have gone on this particular

aspect. I don't want to spoil too much, but the final battle of Act Three is one of the most impressive fights I've seen in the genre, which should dull the sting of the story pausing on a cliffhanger until *PoEII* leaves Early Access.

The only real critique I have of the game so far stems from the boss encounter design. While great fun for the most part, quite often a boss will change phase by way of a lengthy, invulnerable animation, or even just by hoofing it across the arena. In a game where everything else bleeds when you hit it, having moments of downtime in the middle of the game's most impressive, complex fights feels a little bit off. But it does seem like a singular blemish on an otherwise very impressive package.

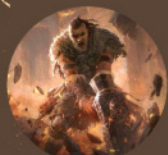
When I asked director Jonathan Rogers what he felt was the one part of the game that could draw *Diablo IV* players away, fresh from a new expansion, he said it was these boss battles. Having fought around 20 of them, and seen some of the ones due later in the Early Access release, it's hard to disagree. But for *Path of Exile* veterans, the story and boss battles are just a warm-up before what lies beyond those 50 hours of main story.

A CURE FOR ALL ILLS

According to game director Jonathan Rogers, the decision to split *Path Of Exile II* into its own game (it was originally planned to be a gigantic expansion for *PoE*) came because of his desire to make a clean break from the original and address some of its fundamental flaws. The original *PoE*, while popular, has a notorious assortment of pain points. Esoteric game mechanics that take external resources to properly learn, character-building that can lead you into unwinnable situations, a convoluted item trading system and an endgame that (while satisfying) often devolves into deleting screen after screen of enemies with little thought.

THE EXPENDABLES

The other four classes coming in Early Access



WARRIOR

A traditional sword-and-board fighter over the Marauder's 'muscle wizard' archetype, but technical in his own way. Shields allow directional, reactive blocking – a new feature in *PoEII*.



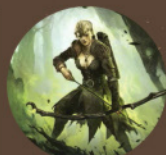
WITCH

Returning from *PoE*, more summon-focused than ever. Holding summoning wands gives her a separate 'spirit' stat, which can be spent on automatically respawning minions.



SORCERESS

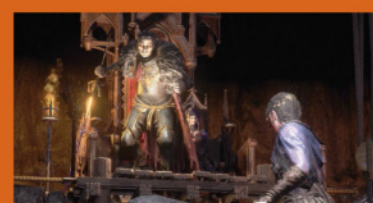
New for *PoEII*. The archetypal all-elemental mage of the game, with lots of synergies based around the elemental debuffs that fire, ice and lighting damage can stack on monsters.



RANGER

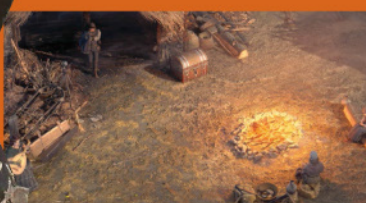
Another returner, playing a more technical game than before, able to ensnare enemies with planted vines and other nature magic, and shoot from the back of her giant bird mount.

RIGHT: Not quite Dracula, but close enough. Act One ends on a dramatic gothic one-on-one fight.



COVER FEATURE

Path Of Exile II



LEFT: The game's first village channels some nostalgic cosy-but-doomed Tristram vibes.

SIGHTSEEING IN HELL

An abridged tourist guide to PoEII's first three regions



GOthic GRIMDARK

Cursed forests, cursed graveyards and a big cursed manor filled with tentacled vampire monsters. But don't miss out on the optional sidequest into a cursed treetop druid's enclave.



SANDY SLAUGHTER

Sand, dust, crumbling ruins and some spectacular architecture. This act culminates in a desert chase on massive wheeled barges pulled by desert dragons; metal as hell.



AZTEC APOCALYPSE

Bad news: the Vaal went mostly extinct thousands of years ago. Good news: casual time travel is a thing in *PoE* and you can loot them at their prime! You're definitely the good guys here!



players sell items to one another through trading NPCs in their customisable hideouts, albeit with a gold tax to prevent this major ease-of-use feature from completely obliterating direct player-to-player item trading. Given the fiddly nature of trading in the first game, it's one of the features I most hope makes the cut as the game approaches launch.

PUMP THE BRAKES

But probably the most significant shift in the design, and one that wasn't too obvious playing through the early game, but seemed to hold true of the later-game footage I was shown, is a throttling of the game's speed. While Grinding Gear still wants players shattering *PoEII* with wild character builds (and plan on reviving the Build Of The Week showcase series on YouTube to highlight the best), it doesn't want you just tuning out of the game entirely as enemies melt around you.

Rogers was keen to highlight that a speedster character in *PoEII* will be swinging five times a second, rather than 50. Still a lot, but parseable by human eyes. The way the game is balanced should de-emphasise all-speed builds too thanks to DPS increases being more effectively multiplicative.

Less frantic swinging doesn't mean you have to go slow, though. Experienced players still have plenty of room to zoom. The original *PoE* has a dedicated speedrunning community (with the best players able to blaze through all ten acts in under three hours), and there are some shades of that even within the core development team. Co-director Mark Roberts boasts that he could

hack his way through *PoEII*'s three Early Access acts in under five hours – a feat most of the other developers still found baffling, considering that the average time for testers is around nine or ten hours for a single act.

DRINK DEEP AND DESCEND

Being so close to release doesn't mean that Grinding Gear is playing any part of this safe, either. I thought it was bold enough to roll back the changes to healing and mana regeneration from the LA press event (where you didn't get additional healing charges from killing minor enemies, only checkpoints and town runs), but it's got something far more significant in the pipeline, and hopefully ready to roll by launch day.

While not in the preview build I had access to, the studio was hard at work completely re-working the Flask system, a part of *Path of Exile* which has remained almost unchanged since the first game's beta release.

Inspired by the simpler control binds of the gamepad UI (D-pad left for health, right for mana), the plan is to limit players to a single slot each for health and mana flasks (with more capacity on both) and introducing a new set of 'trinket' slots that provide utilitarian buffs, like automatically activating freeze/bleed/stun cures. Once again, a push towards cutting out the fiddly bits while retaining that classic *Path of Exile* complexity. It's a common refrain, highlighting just how far Grinding Gear is willing to go in overhauling old, tired ideas if it thinks it has a better option, even if it's just weeks before launch.

Path Of Exile II launches into Early Access on December 7. ■

LESS FRANTIC SWINGING DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO GO SLOW, THOUGH

» This is still unmistakably *Path of Exile*, with all its many hybrid crafting-and-currency items, dizzyingly huge passive skill trees and potential to create freakish cross-class character builds, but designed to be more comprehensible for players who might be coming in fresh from *Diablo IV*'s more streamlined hack 'n' slashery. The highly customisable skill gem system is still there, but no longer reliant on you plugging skills into your equipment like *Final Fantasy* materia. Instead, your skills just go into a side-panel in the UI, letting you freely augment them with potentially game-breaking Support Gems.

On a similar 'cleaner and smarter' note, there's less loot overall. The game is designed to be played well into endgame without needing an elaborate community-made loot filter, dropping fewer but higher-grade items, and providing more ways to convert them into useful currency. Gold – untradeable with other players – exists as a new basic currency, automatically hoovered up as you move, and lets you buy essentials or gamble on potentially good gear if one of your slots is underpowered.

You can freely trade one currency item for another, but it comes with a gold tax, and gold can also be spent on quickly and easily respeccing parts of your sprawling passive skill tree. There was even some talk of letting



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FEATURE

Remnant 2

NEW HORIZONS

Building up **REMNANT 2** outside
the live service game grinder

By Harvey Randall



R

emnant 2's third DLC, *The Dark Horizon*, released earlier this year – and it represents a victory lap for

Gunfire Games, a dev that has made a game I've been a pretty large advocate for. It's felt like a bit of an oasis in a sea of live service speculative tailspins – Gunfire decided to simply release three quite-good DLCs in the span of a year at a reasonable price point, with nary a battle pass in sight.

In addition to getting an early peek at *The Dark Horizon*, I also got to sit down with CEO and game director David Adams, as well as co-founder and development director Ben Gabbard, to talk about the history of the game and its design philosophies for its first anniversary.

Initially, *Remnant: From the Ashes*

spawned from a game called *Chronos: From the Ashes*, a humble launch title for the Oculus Rift. "Very early on in Gunfire we got a contract with Oculus, and they're like, 'Hey, can you make a launch game for the Oculus Rift?'" Adams tells me. "Originally, you went into this tower, which ended up becoming Ward 16 ... you could go through this crystal to go to these other worlds."

"We had a bunch of concepts for, like, the original *Remnant* pitch at the time, but we just said, 'Hey, we'll put it in the *Chronos* universe'. There wasn't really a strategic decision, *Chronos* wasn't a well-known IP, we just liked the world we created."

That phrasing – "we just liked" – seems to be a common throughline the more I talk to Gabbard and Adams. *Remnant 2* had a very solid

launch, grabbing over 100,000 concurrents on Steam, and while that number's now a steady, humble tick between 3,000 and 10,000 players, I'd wager that's mostly down to it being a game you can reasonably finish and be done with.

CONTINUALLY REFRESHING

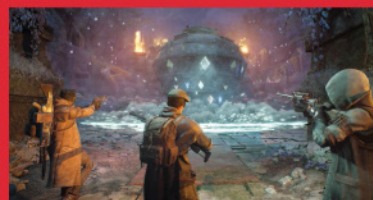
Which is continually refreshing. As a journalist, I tend to be more privy to the rapid-fire rising and falling of live-service games than your average bloke, given I'm often writing news stories about all of them. They often feel like big-budget slot machine pulls. The more we chat, the more I get the sense that Gunfire's core philosophy is just making a game its devs would like to play, releasing it, and welcoming people back once they've got more stuff to do.

The phrase 'Dark Souls with guns' got bandied around a lot when *Remnant: From the Ashes* came out in 2019, and for a decent reason. Crystals were bonfires,

you had a dodge with invincibility frames, enemies would respawn, and so on. However, while Soulslikes definitely inspired it, Adams tells me that the base template of *Remnant 2* was a lot more *Resident Evil 4*, as per the game's early prototypes.

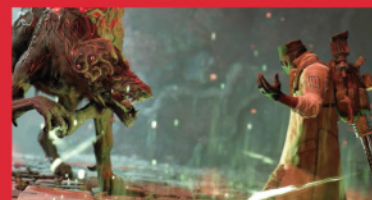
"The original prototype had more survival game-type elements – like, you didn't refresh your health when you went to the crystal, right? Ammo was a much bigger deal, you didn't refill ammo at the crystal. There was a much bigger emphasis on scraping together supplies and trying to survive and that sort of stuff." As for how this vision of a survival game warped over time, that's another thing entirely.

Adams tells me: "It was really just a bunch of little decisions – you're like, 'Hey, let's just refresh your



LEFT: *Remnant*'s got a lot of creeps to scrap with – from ghosts to jars that fire machine-gun needles.

RIGHT: I somehow don't think Fido's going to sit when asked. Here, doggie...

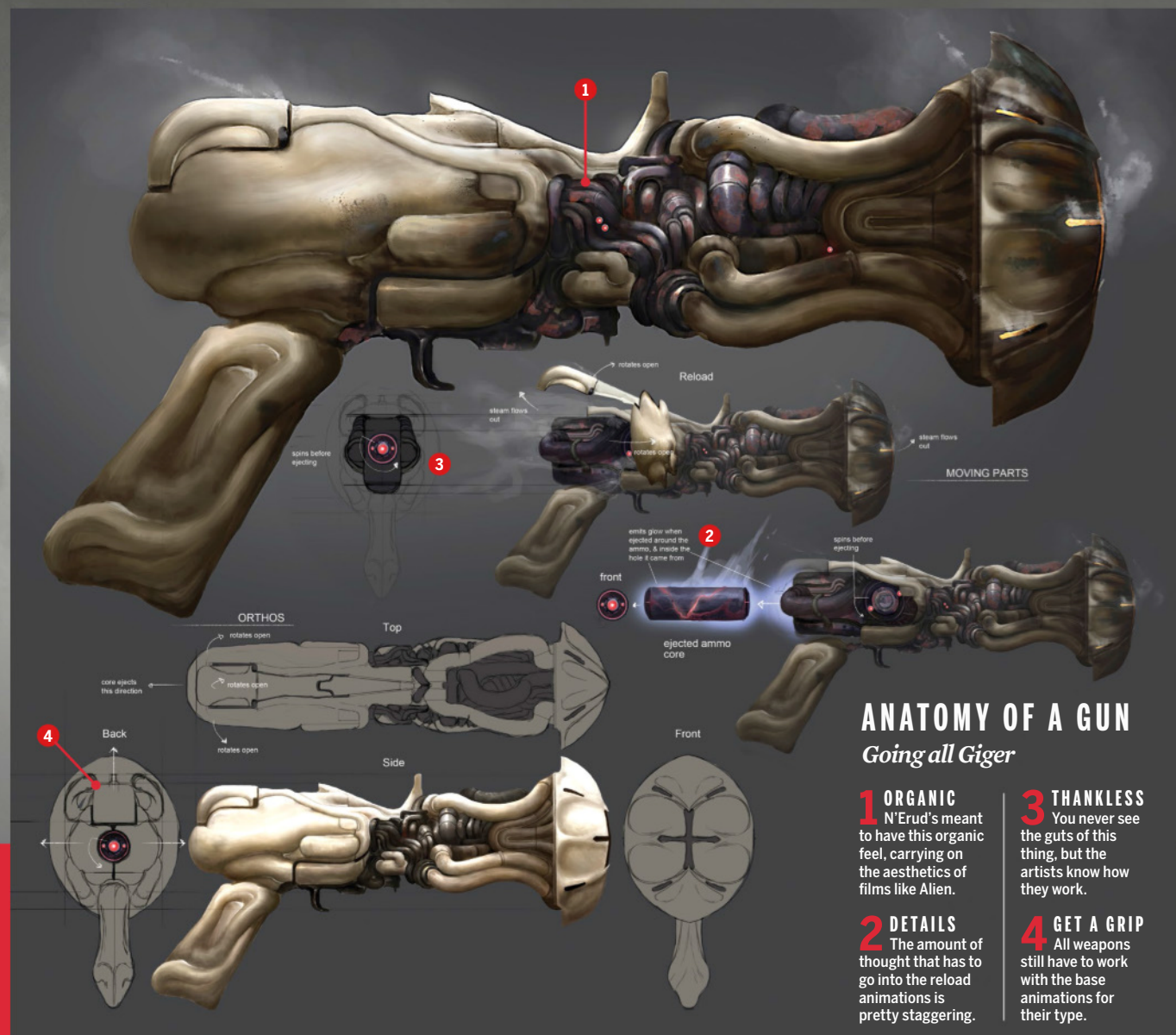


LEFT: The post-Root apocalypse doesn't leave much room for style...

RIGHT: N'Erud is the focus of *The Dark Horizon* DLC – but each expands the game's three base worlds, fleshing them out for subsequent main campaign runs while also providing their own bespoke little experience.



health when you visit a crystal'. You make that decision, and at some point someone's like, 'Well we should just refresh ammo.' Eventually, Gunfire Games produced something that "became 'Dark Souls with guns', but actually started out being more inspired by *Resident Evil 4*, which is, like, the original inspiration ... I would say that core gameplay didn't change". When I ask about those additive inspirations – as the DNA of other games like *Diablo* and *Dark Souls* is pretty apparent – Adams comments, with refreshing honesty: "I wish I could say it's like, there was some masterplan, right? But we're



ANATOMY OF A GUN

Going all Giger

1 ORGANIC N'Erud's meant to have this organic feel, carrying on the aesthetics of films like *Alien*.

2 DETAILS The amount of thought that has to go into the reload animations is pretty staggering.

3 THANKLESS You never see the guts of this thing, but the artists know how they work.

4 GET A GRIP All weapons still have to work with the base animations for their type.

MEDIC!

While there are 14 classes (Archetypes) you can mix-and-match, new players probably ought to start with the medic, which comes with extra healing and a fashionable caduceus symbol so you don't forget what their job is.

STARTING GEAR

While the guns do get alien and weird as time goes on, there's also plenty of starter fare to be getting on with, LMGs and lever-action rifles rock side-by-side with straps that wouldn't be out of place in *Destiny 2*.



Not pictured here: The Awakened King's weapon, a giant mace with a bunch of fae bodies chained to it. Brutal.

» very much driven by what we just think will be fun, or what we would like to play.” It’s at this point that Gabbard hops in and, jokingly, implores me to, “Write that there was a masterplan, we just couldn’t tell you that”. I can only assume I glimpsed secrets beyond my ken, and was hit with a *Men in Black*-style memory-eraser stick.

Adams continues: “It really just becomes an amalgamation of all the cool things [we liked], and what I’m



TAKING ROOT

The Root is a parasitic cosmic force that just so happens to take the form of nasty tree beasts – just like this one.

TAKING AIM

It also just so happens that the most effective way to cull existential dread is, well, shooting it with a big gun. Sometimes you'll use magic powers, but the shooting is the main thing.

proud of at the end of the day is that if you like *Remnant*, there's not really another game that's like [it]." In the sense that it's the way the series combines its inspirations that sets it apart? That's something I would agree with.

In case you're green to the series, *Remnant's* entire shtick is that you've been connected to a bunch of other worlds and, generally, that's been a bit of an issue for everyone involved. In *Remnant 2*, you go to the

Dickensian gothic hellscape of Losomn (which has faerie castles in it sometimes), the satyr woodlands of Yaesha and the Giger-esque sci-fi nightmare of N'Erud.

It surprised me to hear from Adams that these worlds weren't thinned from a herd of multiversal ideas – as a matter of fact, they pretty much nailed them in one: "There actually weren't any worlds designed that we didn't use... I wrote the first two-page document for Losomn, and

every single thing in that document, [all of it] made it into the game."

EXPANSIONS

As for why Gunfire Games chose to focus on expanding the three existing worlds with the DLC, rather than creating a new one, Adams is pretty frank on the subject. "There were a lot of things that went into that... it's frankly way more work to make a whole new world, right? We were committing to do three DLCs in a



LEFT: One of my favourite things about *Remnant 2* – and its predecessor – has always been the variety of places you romp through, including rain-slick streets and magical fairy kingdoms.



year, it would have been nearly impossible to do a whole new world in that timeframe. So there's just a strategic element of like, 'OK, realistically, what can we do?' Instead, the dev team focused on making the old worlds feel "as fresh as humanly possible".

The Awakened King is perhaps the most samey, though it does put you on Losomn's dramatic coastline – meanwhile, *The Forgotten Kingdom* makes genuine strides to shift Yaesha's colour palette and add a newfound sense of verticality to the game. Having seen a bit of *The Dark Horizon*, it's aesthetically different from what we've seen of N'Erud thus far, trading out hellscapes for farms and superstructures.

One thing I've always been impressed by is just how reasonable those DLCs have been. They each run you £8.50, add about five to eight hours of campaign content, a new Archetype and a bunch of new items,

and then ask nothing more from you. This, in a market where it feels like every game has to demand your full attention with a battle pass strapped to the underbelly, is genuinely refreshing.

As to why Gunfire Games has opted for this model, Adams flatly states: "I can say very confidently that we make literally zero decisions

based on how much money we're going to make... we really do just say, 'Hey, let's make the coolest game possible,' and hopefully as many people as

humanly possible want to play that game. It's very hard for me, and this isn't me dissing live services, I can't imagine a scenario, if that's your philosophy, where you're going to be like, 'Yes, this will legitimately make the game cooler'."

"WE MAKE ZERO DECISIONS BASED ON HOW MUCH MONEY WE'LL MAKE"

LOOKING BACK

To wrap things up, I ask one of my usual questions when it comes to retrospective interviews like this

– namely, if you could send a message back in time yourself while you were making it, what would that be?

Once Gabbard tidies away the very reasonable question of whether that'd be limited to game development stuff and not, say, 'stock up on toilet paper', Adams tells me: "If you could just go back and say, 'Hey, by the way, the game you're going to make is this,' they'd make that game way better the first time, and faster. That's why everybody loves to make a sequel. The sequel is like, 'cool, now we've stumbled our way into the game we know we're making, we can just make the game without stumbling again', which feels great."

Outside of the logistics stuff, though? "I think if I had to tell myself personally, I would say, 'Don't worry, it's going to be good, and people are going to like it,'" to which Gabbard chimes in: "High fives, yeah, that'd relieve a lot of pressure and stress, I'll tell you that."

You can play *The Dark Horizon* now on Steam – alongside a free boss rush update that adds a roguelike mode I'm keen to get stuck into, myself. ■

BELOW: N'Erud's sanitary staff clearly don't get the wage they deserve.





FORGING ARMOUR

Building out the Leto Mk II

1 UNHOLY DIVER

There's a small bit of me that's sad we didn't get a diving helmet.

2 SEAMS FAMILIAR

The closest by far to the Mark 1 suit from the first game.

3 CHEST PAINS

A little top-heavy, sporting battle damage, and a clipping nightmare.

4 GUN DAMN

An evolution on the diving helmet, though I can see why it wasn't a winner.

5 SPORTING TRY

This thing looks like a college football player. Brilliant!

6 THE FINAL PRODUCT

A thick midsection and a clear desire to mess you up. Gorgeous.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Lost in space

How disappointing that, despite consistent feedback from the gaming community on what they don't like about *Starfield*, Bethesda seemingly hasn't heard them. The space-based RPG's first major expansion, *Shattered Space*, is getting underwhelming scores across the board. The problem?

Bethesda delivers more of the same *Starfield* experience as before, without fixing any of the issues that dragged the original release down.

This is especially disappointing considering how another major AAA release that got it wrong out of the gate, *Diablo IV*, has been completely transformed by Blizzard in its new expansion *Vessel of Hatred*, a masterful piece of DLC that recalibrates the action RPG in all the right ways.

R. Jones

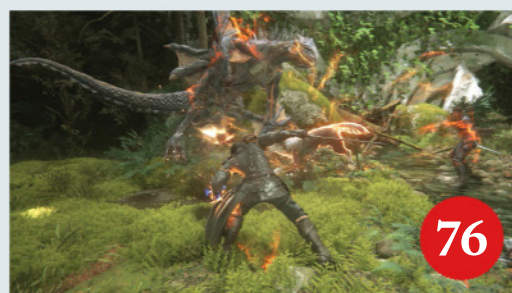
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PRINT EDITOR

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Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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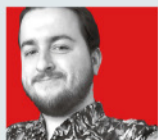
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This month's frozen reviewers...



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Fur pants
Currently playing
Frostpunk 2
This month
Kept the PC Gamer
Towers furnace lit by
fuelling it with cakes.



JUSTIN WAGNER
Specialist in
Cosmic bollocks
Currently playing
Starfield: Shattered Space
This month
Realised the future of
humankind in space
is super, duper dull.



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Hatred
Currently playing
Diablo IV: Vessel of Hatred
This month
Drank deep from a cup
filled with dark, toxic
liquid. It was New Coke.



DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
Petting Torgal
Currently playing
Final Fantasy XVI
This month
Had an 'I'm dead
inside'-off with Clive
Rosfield. Her gravelly,
haunted voice was top.



JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Maths in swamps
Currently playing
Satisfactory
This month
Built a huge machine
dedicated to the
production of bacon
sandwiches. Tasty.

70



DEEP FREEZE

Endure a blizzard of tough choices and rough consequences in **FROSTPUNK 2**

By Christopher Livingston

Citizens of New London: as you prepare to banish me from our city forever, I hope you understand that I always had good intentions. I never meant to run out of food, let hundreds of you perish from cold, or have the streets patrolled by giant fascist robots who stomp entire buildings flat while trying to prevent a single starving child from stealing a chocolate bar. Things just... got outta hand.

But before I step out onto the frozen tundra to die despised and alone, I would like to point out that a lot of what went wrong is, from my perspective, entirely your fault. If you could agree on a school curriculum our city wouldn't have roving gangs of knife-wielding children. If you'd let me harvest dead citizens for spare parts you might have replacements for those eyes you lost due to working double shifts in my horribly squalid factories. And if you hadn't kept sabotaging my efforts to bring new technology to our city I wouldn't have had to use quite so much new technology – like my mechanised police robots – to brutally punish you. Farewell! I hate you all.

Thirty years after the events of the original *Frostpunk*, the world is still freezing cold and society is still a hot

mess. *Frostpunk 2* is much bigger than the first game – in *Frostpunk* you finish the campaign with a city of maybe 800 citizens, whereas now you start out with a population ten times that. This increase in scale isn't entirely successful: as a city builder, *Frostpunk 2* is far more abstract than the original, and I never felt much of a connection to, or interest in, my city as a physical place. As

a society management simulation, however, *Frostpunk 2* is just as effective as the original. It's packed wall-to-wall with torturous choices, agonising consequences and a sliding scale of morality that's slippery as ice.

CHILLY BUILDER

Once again you're in charge of New London, decades after it was founded and built in the original game. The

Coal, which has kept the city's generator burning, is dwindling

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A city builder and society sim set in a frozen world

£38

DEVELOPER
11 bit studios

PUBLISHER
11 bit studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
frostpunk2.com

breaking news isn't great: coal, which has kept the city's generator burning for 30 years, is dwindling. It's time to expand the borders and harvest more materials from the frozen ground outside the city, while restlessly searching the distant frigid wastelands for entirely new resources, like oil, to keep your people alive and warm.

In *Frostpunk 2* you no longer place roads, houses, or single factories in your city as you expand, but lay out massive districts for housing and industry that can support thousands of people. Instead of a timescale of hours or days, entire weeks rush by in a matter of seconds. This transformation from the small settlements of the original game to a metropolis is exciting, especially visually, but it loses something in the process. My city looks gorgeous, a sprawling network of dieselpunk pipelines, busy roadways and fume-belching factories, but even at its slowest speed it's like looking at a city in timelapse, which makes it feel all the more artificial.

There's still some degree of micromanagement and strategy. Harvesting means deploying frostbreakers to smash the ice and expose the resources beneath, which then can be harvested by building an extraction district on top. There are bonuses and penalties from certain layouts – housing does well next to sources of heat, but suffers from pollution when they're too close to industrial areas. You no longer assign workers to buildings, but you can adjust the output of districts, which dictates what percentage of workers it will employ, letting you underclock districts if you need their workforce elsewhere. Still, fine-tuning my districts doesn't quite capture my interest the way most city builders do when they have a more granularity to their systems. Much of the depth of *Frostpunk 2* is reserved for the most challenging element of the city: dealing with the people who live in it.

FACTION REACTION

Try to please them all

26% ICEBLOODS
In favour of basics for citizens, but against punishing bad cops.

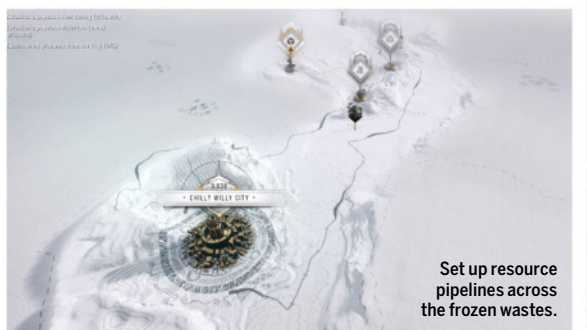
31% STALWARTS
Want a meritocracy with a side of 'let's freely experiment on prisoners'.



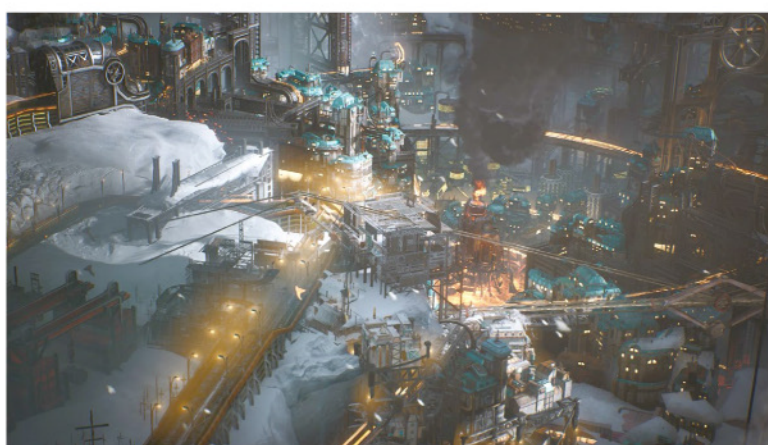
21% LORDS
Their ancestors were well-off families. Still snooty about it.

12% PILGRIMS
In favour of equality, and also want to turn off the generator forever.

10% MACHINISTS
They love automation. One of mine fell in love with a robot.



Set up resource pipelines across the frozen wastes.



ABOVE: The Iceblood faction is pretty badass, really.

BELOW: Crank your generator to overdrive... just not for too long.





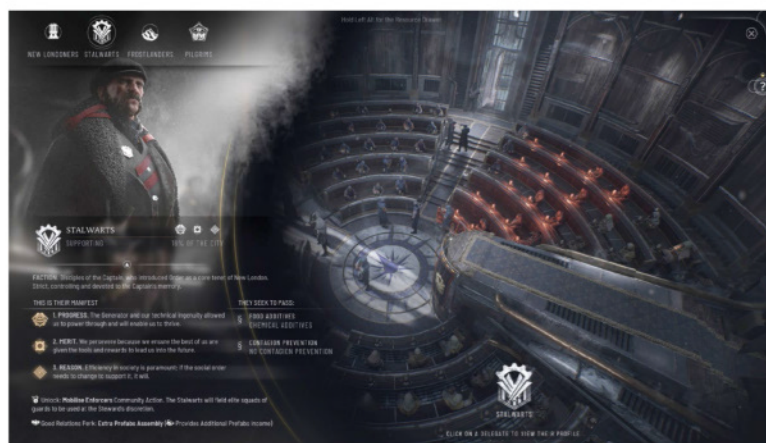
Radical splinter groups will rise depending on your choices.



RIGHT: Zooming in gives you a little scene to examine.

FAR RIGHT: Win over 51% of the Council to pass laws.

BELOW: Making one faction happy usually means making everyone else mad.



❧ EVERYONE DISLIKED THAT

Influencing every action you take in *Frostpunk 2* are New London's factions and communities. You begin the game with only two or three factions in your city, but as the months and years pass the choices you make, or don't make, will give rise to more. During times of unrest or sweeping change, smaller factions may splinter off the main groups, and while they only represent a small percentage of your population, they can still create problems.

My city's biggest faction was the Stalwarts: law-and-order fanatics who pretty quickly started suggesting disturbing ideas like thought control programs and experimentation on prisoners – even before I'd built a prison. I also had more moderate groups like the Frostlanders, who had tried (and failed) to establish their own city outside the walls, and New Londoners who were dedicated to keeping the central generator running. But my choice to research and implement new tech saw the rise of a group called Pilgrims, who loathe technology so much they want me to shut off the giant generator that's kept humanity alive for the past 30 years. Survivalists called the Icebloods also appeared, badasses who walk around shirtless in the cold and wrestle bears – like, for real, bears – but also think city guards should be immune from prosecution. Some of these factions worry me. Honestly, they all worry me.

Factions don't just beef with you but with each other. As the Pilgrims were getting more and more annoyed with my insistence on providing heat to my citizens, they requested that I let a bunch of them leave the city to explore the frozen world outside. That was 100% fine with me – the fewer Pilgrims on my streets, the better, right? But while they were off chanting in the snow (or whatever cold-loving zealots do), the Stalwarts saw their chance to grow in power. They visited the Pilgrims' unattended kids and indoctrinated them into their youth programme. That made the Pilgrims even more unhappy, and I wasn't crazy about the idea of the Stalwarts boosting their numbers with brainwashed kids, either.

Getting laws passed among these conflicting factions almost always requires making deals: a group can be persuaded to vote against their interests in exchange for some consideration later, like agreeing to research a branch of technology they favour, or letting them set the agenda for the next vote. Break a promise

Break a promise you made, and their approval of you will plunge

you made, and their approval of you will plunge, sometimes so much they'll become actively hostile and begin holding anti-you rallies, which can shut down your districts until you either start giving them what they want or send in a stronger faction to run them off. There's a dilemma for you: should I squash the zealot community by empowering the fascist community? Spoiler: I did.

COLD LOGIC

Once I started betraying my own values it was pretty easy to keep on doing it. At first I scoffed at the idea of robot patrols, but then crime went through the roof and passing reasonable laws would have taken far too long and cost me more political capital than I could spend. And there was my city's biggest and most favourable faction essentially elbowing me and pointing at a button labelled 'activate giant robot cops'.

Crime went down. That makes it worth it, right?

Thankfully, I could take a break from my massive toxic city on the brink of disaster by poking my head up and exploring the massive world beyond New London. The wasteland is dotted with resources to harvest, frozen settlements to plunder and tidbits of lore about what's happened in the decades since the events of the first game. Best of all, there are larger locations in the world you can turn into proper colonies. Peel off a couple thousand citizens, send them there, and begin building mining operations just like at home, though on a much smaller scale than New London.

There are huge benefits to colonisation – connect your colonies and main city with trails and skylines and you can ship resources like oil, food and manpower between them, which saved New London from outright disaster on more than one occasion. The only downside is that handling the needs of one city is already a lot, and each colony you connect to your home base is like adding another hand grenade to your juggling act. I sent those pesky Pilgrims to go colonise a new location, and they immediately began sabotaging it. God, I hate them.

Not so shockingly, on more than one occasion my trust meter – the constantly shrinking line at the bottom of my screen – went completely dark. Pass enough unpopular laws, break enough promises, run out of food because you were too busy tinkering with a colony instead of minding the shop, and your competing factions will finally agree on something: kicking you out of office and into the snow to die. On the plus side there are lots of ways to start over: in addition to the New London campaign, there's a sandbox mode with seven different starting locations and other modifiers to play with. As a city builder, *Frostpunk 2* is a bit of a step down from the original due to the increase in scale, which unfortunately keeps the city at arm's length. As a society sim, however, it's every bit as engrossing as the first *Frostpunk*. ■

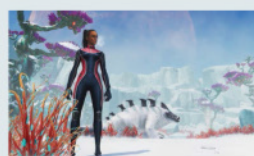
COLD COMFORT

Other chilly games you should warm up to



THE LONG DARK

A deep and brutal fight for survival in the freezing wilderness of Canada.



SUBNAUTICA: BELOW ZERO

Hypothermia joins all the other challenges of exploring the underwater world.



SNOWRUNNER

Fight through more than just mud in the mountains in this terrific off-road sim.



STARDEW VALLEY

Snow doesn't have to be punishing! *Stardew*'s winters are lovely and relaxing.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Not as satisfying a city builder as the original, but the society simulation is still on point.

85

BRAKING BAD

#DRIVE RALLY takes arcade racing off-road

By Kyle Hoekstra

As an arcade racer with clean, semi-realistic visuals, mushrooming dust trails, bulging wheel arches and pastiche Looney Tunes environments, **#DRIVE Rally** makes an appealing first impression. Across its four region-specific championships, it wheels out a fleet of 1990s rally legends. In Holzberg, we skid through fir forests and Bavarian towns. In the chunky Bretzel, a BMW M3; and in fiery Sandsturm, an Audi Quattro. Dry Crumbs is an Old West setting of frontier towns and sandstone buttes, while Revontuli yields snow, humble hatchbacks and a Scandi classic in the form of the Brick. Vinh Vang gives us dirt tracks passing long grass, villages and a giant Buddha, its star ride a likeness of the Toyota Celica.

In its plain stylings it recalls fan-favourite *Art of Rally*. While that game held you at an aerial perspective, **#DRIVE Rally** pulls you into traditional chase and cockpit views and puts some heft behind the wheel. It aims to match its light-touch humour, too, by enrolling stereotypes for the voiced co-driver which head up each championship. You're served a Schwarzenegger clone in Hans, George is a routin' tootin' old-timer, then there's sparky airhead Emma and hot-blooded Jack. They'll read out pace notes while you race, as well as venturing

commentary on your performance. They add character, even if I'm not especially won over by lines like, "OMG, we totally rocked that race. High-fives all around!"

Electronic whirrs help transport you into the driving seat

SPIN TYRES

On the track, satisfying kinetic clunks and electronic whirrs help transport you into the driving seat. These sounds rumble behind your ear in cockpit view while a cinematic mode hides the UI. A quibble, however, is that the audio feedback from the track feels incomplete: when dust and snow erupts in a cloud, I want to hear the crunching

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
What is it? Arcade rally racer with iconic '90s cars

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Pixel Perfect Dude

PUBLISHER
Pixel Perfect Dude

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-7300HQ,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1050

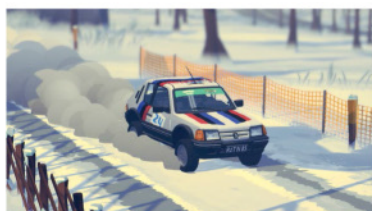
MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
drive.game/rally

gravel, pinging debris and cracking ice. On that note, the lean aesthetics result in very accommodating system requirements. A featured photo mode is a plus.

LOVE HANDLES

The wobbly looks are reflected in the car handling, which regularly tosses you into long drifts and accidental Scandi flicks. It takes some getting used to, but once mastered it's a source of satisfaction as you successfully wend your way through pines and evade the nefarious route markers which add penalties to your time when bashed. This is a time-trial, after all. Though a leaderboard compares your score with local bots and global players, you're fundamentally racing against the track and your own impulse to bomb through it. Those penalties for cutting and overshooting corners can get annoying, though, discounting hidden paths and surprises in that theme. Which – OK – don't exist in rally, but would seem consistent with this game's cartoonish presentation.

The stages themselves are easily digestible at three to five minutes long, yet while each setting has its



ABOVE: Even the boxy little cars are eye-catching.





TOP: *#DRIVE Rally* features both controller and steering wheel support.

ABOVE: Dust trails erupt in pleasing plumes.

own flavour, you'll ultimately see the same segments many times over the course of a championship. Developer Pixel Perfect Dude is more interested in players moving through the stages than repeating them, distributing rewards – new cars, car parts, and cash – at the end of a rally regardless of outcome. And in practice it's more enjoyable, the route cleared to the flow state at its heart, when you ease up on the throttle and aim on finishing, not winning.

CUSTOMISATION

You can deploy those rewards in the quick race mode, otherwise you'll march through the championships with whichever vehicle the game supplies. The absence of an overarching team and car management mode feels like a miss, especially when the car customisation and the championship interface – spread over the pages of a binder – are so neatly put together.

I am really fond of *#DRIVE Rally* and its pick-up-and-play ease. As it proceeds through Early Access, its small band of developers may find ways to address its struggle to ward off fatigue. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A competent off-road arcade racer which beguiles with its boxy hatchbacks and boat-like coupés.

68



More power makes evading chicanes a more delicate manoeuvre.

HEAD OFF-ROAD

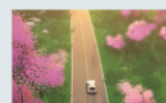
Hit the gravel in these worthy off-road adventures



DIRT 2.0
A deep, rewarding sim from Codemasters covering real life stages from Wales to Argentina.



FORZA HORIZON 5
A welcoming and laid-back driving experience set under the Mexican sun across a range of biomes.



ART OF RALLY
A charming and vibrant top-down rally simulator with a lot of heart, rolling out cars from the '60s onwards.



EXPEDITIONS: A MUDRUNNER GAME
Not a rally game, but involves driving big trucks through lots of mud and over mountains.

CIVI-LITE-ZATION

Microsoft attempts to grab some territory from Sid Meier with **ARA: HISTORY UNTOLD**

By Robert Zak

George Washington and I go way back. One of our projects was to build a great road between our capitals, but the Ethiopians – whose territory this road was to pass through – refused us access. So George and I flattened Addis Ababa to make way for our old-world trade highway. All was wonderful, but over the centuries our two territories filled the void left behind by Ethiopia.

At the macro level, Microsoft and Oxide Games' stab at the *Civ*-like turn-based strategy genre is a fine vehicle for the bonkers stories that arise from a randomised alternative history mish-mashing the key people, technological advancements and nations of our own. But at a time when the history-themed 4X genre is looking rather populous, does *Ara* do enough to stand the test of time?

Let's start with the positives. This game is a sight to behold and Oxide Games knows it, which is why it's given us the ability to zoom all the

way in to see the life of our great nation up close – hundreds of little civvies wandering around towns, tilling the fields, worshipping at temples, dancing jigs in the streets, and (for some reason) walking alongside raccoons in the streets. Lots of raccoons...

In the wilderness, wolves chase deer in the forests and bird flocks fly in formation; in a besieged city, people mindlessly run around in sheer panic while archers or artillery rain hell down on them. Likewise, during battles you can watch fully 3D-rendered simulations each turn. These features give a

Starts you off at the beginning of human history with a single city

wonderful sense of scale and liveliness to the world in a genre that can sometimes feel a bit abstracted from the life of your people down on the ground. Now I've seen this, the thought of going back to the deserted cities of other 4X games seems bleak.

The city-building mechanics are great too. As your city grows, you pick a region to claim, with each region being made up of zones that you can place buildings in. You're encouraged to create dedicated districts, as various production buildings – farms, apothecaries, weavers – grant bonuses for having buildings of the same type in the same region. You really have to think about what goes where, and what type of production to focus on given the surrounding resources. With the help of tiles that follow the contours of the land, as opposed to traditional hexes, cities end up looking very organic, with swathes of farmland, busy docklands, bustling traders' districts, and mining regions, not to mention triumphs like the Pyramids, the Great Lighthouse, the London Eye, and all look fantastic.

DEVIATIONS

Ara starts you off at the beginning of human history with a single city. From here you build more cities, gather resources, and meet (and inevitably war with) other civilisations, all while making sure that your key currencies of gold, food, timber, and materials stay in the green. Your goal is to make your civilisation the greatest in human history, taking it on a millennia-long journey from the spearmen of the Ancient Era to – in *Ara*'s case – the mech warriors of the Singularity Era.

Ara applies a couple of deviations to this template. First of all, the game is governed by Prestige, a score that tracks your achievements in areas like military prowess, scientific discovery, religion, culture and science. The nation with the most Prestige at the end wins, which

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
History-spanning 4X grand strategy game, or Phil Spencer's *Civilization*

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Oxide Games

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 13700HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
arahistoryuntold.com

ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

Some of the other 4X games of recent years



HUMANKIND
Amplitude Studios took its experience with the *Endless Legend* and *Endless Space* games and superimposed it onto human history. *Humankind* has some novel twists, like letting you combine cultures over the years and fight out turn-based battles on a battle screen, and at this point a ton of expansion content too.



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION
Civs IV, V, and VI are all modern enough and distinct enough to play on their own merits. *Civ V* is beautifully balanced, *IV* has tough AI and great depth in stuff like spy networks and vassalage, while *VI* is the most accessible of them. Then there are excellent mods, with *Realism Invictus* for *Civ IV* and *Vox Populi* for *Civ V*.

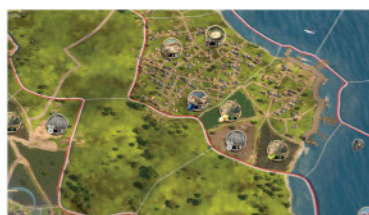
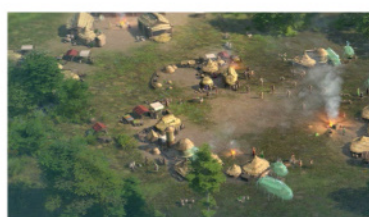


OLD WORLD
Old World confines you to the ancient and classical eras, digging nice and deep into that time period rather than trying to encompass all of everything ever. The integration of family lineages, politics, and myriad events gives it an RPG touch not unlike *Crusader Kings*, and it overcomes that frequent 4X problem of silly AI.



MILLENNIA
The most recent contender in this list introduces plenty of ideas, like plagues, a distinct feel for different 'ages', and making your empire reflective of your actions (take part in lots of war, and you'll unlock various bonuses in that direction). Its lacklustre presentation and cludgy UI hold it back though.





ABOVE: Copernicus is leader of Poland in Ara, which makes you wonder who in this timeline is going to figure out that the Earth orbits the Sun...

FAR LEFT: The triumphs look fantastic, and give you precious Prestige.

BELOW: It's nice to zoom into your empire and watch your people, ahem, milling around.

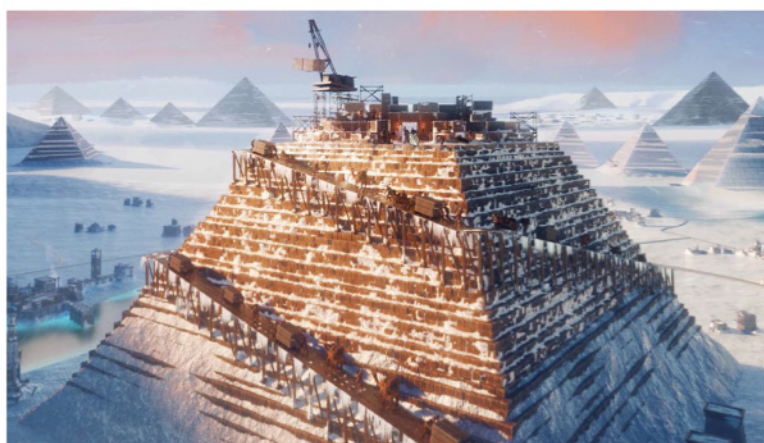
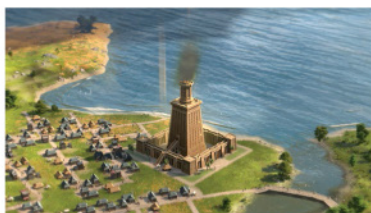
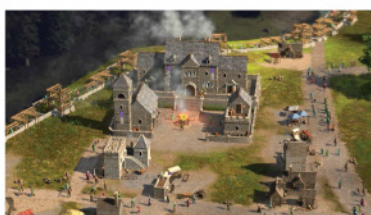




ABOVE: Leaders in the game look the part, but are sadly devoid of dialogue and flourish to give them character.

FAR RIGHT: The crafting system is an invaluable part of a good strategy, but it can get a bit too fiddly.

BELOW: Seeing the destruction of sieges and pillaging up close gives me a thirst for more.



means *Ara* isn't just about optimising your strategy towards some singular victory condition. Having to defend yourself in a war can be a frustrating waste of time and resources in *Civilization*, but here if you find yourself beset by conflict, then putting up a resolute defence and preventing the enemy claiming the goals declared in their Casus Belli will gain you military prestige, adding to your overall Prestige. You can still orient yourself in a certain direction – be it religious superpower or haven for commerce – but it's now viable to switch your focus as the game progresses, while detours into secondary areas of development aren't time wasted.

Your journey through history is split into three Acts, each made up of four Eras which you advance through by researching technologies. The big twist here is that at the end of each act, the 25% of civs with the lowest Prestige score get outright culled from the game – reduced to ruins for the explorers of more successful nations to sift through. You can turn this 'culling' off, but ridiculous though the idea of entire civilisations just vanishing might be for anyone not called Graham Hancock, it gives a good shake-up to your campaign just as it might start stagnating.

Beyond being able to plunder the ruins of lost civs, you have all this new resource-rich land to expand into, which revives some of the dynamism from the very start of the game when everyone's rushing to establish their borders. It also offers flagging civs a chance to claw their way back into the game by expanding into swathes of new territory, which addresses the genre bugbear of games becoming tedious and unwinnable far too early for those who didn't get off to the best start.

Inevitably though, this new land too gets filled, and that frisson of excitement dissipates to reveal to you what *Ara* is most of the time, which isn't bad exactly, but certainly a bit thin. Diplomacy is threadbare for a start. The fully animated avatars for the game's substantial roster of 36 leaders look great, but lacking in dialogue, they're void of personality. They may as well be mannequins with an unusual hankering for war.

There's no flexibility to negotiations, no way of setting extortionate truce terms, and relationship bars deplete so fast that everyone seems like an enemy to everyone else at all times.

Combat, meanwhile, recalls the infamous 'stacks of doom' of *Civilization 4*. There's some interesting stuff in terms of arranging

stacks into specific formations for combat bonuses, and ranged combat from adjacent tiles allows for a degree of sneaky guerrilla tactics, but for the most part it's 'army with bigger number wins.' A lot was made

of the irregular-shaped tiles that hug coastlines and riverbanks, so it's a shame that things like crossing a river to attack don't seem to have an effect on battle calculations. Units level up, but you can't customise or upgrade them to their more modern equivalents, so here too things are a bit too automated. It's lovely watching battles play out in 3D view, but it seems like a bit of a luxury when resources could've been better put to refining the core combat instead; you shouldn't build a palace while the people are starving (I mean, I would and I did in *Ara*, but that's necessary so I can sit around drinking wine and coming up with pithy proverbs).

BLACKSMITHS

Things get a lot more hands-on with the crafting system, whereby you use buildings like bakeries, blacksmiths,

and workshops to craft items that you then use as Amenities to temporarily boost key city attributes like happiness, health, and city security, or Supplies that you can freely swap in and out of buildings for smaller but long-term bonuses.

The crafting system is great for drafting things to where they're most needed. The growth of new cities can be accelerated by sending crafted Feasts, Meals, and other grub to them as Amenities, for instance. If a city is threatened by invasion, send it some strategic codices and you'll boost the strength of forces fighting in its zone of control for 15 turns.

Unfortunately, the UI isn't well set up to deal with the huge number of interdependent crafting queues you end up with, and it can become a bit of a micromanagement mire in the late game. It's a good idea, with plenty of satisfying use cases, but could do with being less fiddly. In defence of the UI though, it's excellent apart from this blip, with nested menus and popup bubbles linking to highlighted text helping you immediately understand every key term in the game.

In its current form, *Ara* is 4X lite, a pretty princeling next to the great emperors of the genre that may lack a unique and compelling hook for experienced players. But being lightweight has its plus sides. It has very little bloat, so the different systems of the game never feel clashy or confusing. Combine that with a lovely aesthetic and well integrated info boxes and tooltips, and *Ara* is a very accessible jaunt for 4X newcomers.

Finally, Rome wasn't built in a day; 4X games tend to be vastly different beasts between initial launch and their final expansion. By playing things safe, Oxide Games has a lot of room through expansions to layer on systems (or expand existing underserved ones, like religion or diplomacy). This is a fine foray for Microsoft, and even if the history here doesn't exactly feel 'untold', it's told in an eye-catching, engaging way that will keep me clicking through the eras for some time yet. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A beautifully presented and accessible game, *Ara: History Untold* is a pretty picture book rather than a deep tome.

70

You shouldn't build a palace while people are starving (I did)

TOP NOTCH

Ranking *Ara's* features into its own Tier System



TIER 1 TRIUMPHANT
Presentation, zooming into cities.



TIER 2 REMARKABLE
City-building, end-of-act culling.



TIER 3 MEMORABLE
Combat.



TIER 4 FORGETTABLE
Diplomacy, religion, enemy AI.

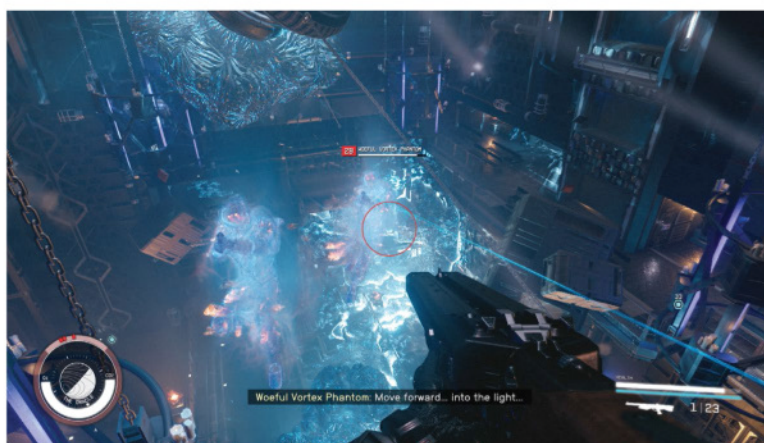
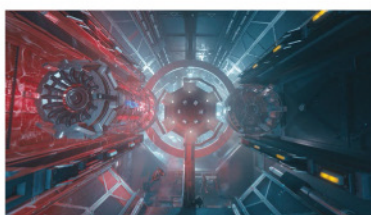




Bethesda ragdolls survived the space age.

FAR RIGHT: In the right gravity, a shotgun is just a second boost pack.

BELOW: This new moon buggy is great for fleeing any unwelcome fights you start.



SPACING OUT

SHATTERED SPACE is damned by its lack of interest in addressing *Starfield*'s failings

Justin Wagner

S*tarfield's* vision of the future was just too timid. The squeaky clean corridors of New Atlantis did less for me than the crime-riddled backwater of Ripton, and the average planet's points of interest were spread so thin I felt like I was bushwhacking through miles of desolate space just to find something memorable. So I went into *Shattered Space* with some anticipation: maybe a more focused experience would allow me to see the potential that Bethesda had previously spread too thin.

Unfortunately this DLC had the opposite effect on me. The stage is set to dazzle: it's a handcrafted zone densely packed with quests and NPCs with competing interests. There are new weapons to find, unique enemies to use them on, and a fresh narrative far from the shackles of the glib main story. Instead of bringing its sandbox to life, instead *Shattered Space* delivers a bland stew of business as usual. It's largely on-rails, light on substance and committed to a narrative I'm already forgetting the details.

The high points in *Shattered Space* are the new environments and worldbuilding on headlining planet Va'ruun'kai. After exploring a derelict space station crawling with vortex phantoms – which is what *Starfield* calls ghosts when they are made out of science – you're thrust into the political mire of the House Va'ruun, a cult that worships a serpent god largely unexplored in the main game. These sorts of faction quests tend to shine in *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls*, but Va'ruun's mystique wears off once you settle into the rhythm of its storylines.

So often *Shattered Space* is weighed down by the sense it's going through the motions, like when I found a locked door with a computer next to it. On the computer screen was a big button that said "open door". I hit the button, and it opened the door. Does that qualify as a puzzle? An obstacle? A captcha?

This sort of half-hearted gesture towards substance haunts the

narrative, too. For a brief moment, a couple of characters posture about the relationship between religion and science in an age where humanity has abandoned its home planet and become dependent on its own technology; and then they snap out of it and point me toward the next objective marker before anyone can take a meaningful stance. *Shattered Space*

proves too gun-shy to tip the status quo of its world in any direction. At the end of the expansion's main mission you can make a choice with huge theoretical implications, but they stay theoretical. Every new idea amounts to little, and what's left just reminds me why I didn't care for *Starfield* in the first place.

The things I had the most fun with in my playthrough were added

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The first expansion for Bethesda's space exploration RPG, complete with a fractious cult to investigate and their newly explorable homeworld

EXPECT TO PAY
£26

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

in free patches. The new rover makes trundling over space rocks quicker and more satisfying, and an in-game mod menu adds customisability with no fuss. *Shattered Space* doesn't move the needle an inch. I want to be absorbed by this world, but I'm still wrestling with a messy UI, talking with expressionless characters as they glitch through tables, and once I've wrapped up, returning to a ship that I rarely have a reason to take anywhere.

THE ELEPHANT IN VA'RUUN

I love other Bethesda RPGs despite prominent shortcomings: *Skyrim's* disposable action, *Fallout 4's* infamously austere dialogue trees. But occupying those meticulously crafted worlds is worth overlooking those things. I continually regard *Starfield* the opposite way: it's a game that, despite robust systems and impressive technology, just can't pull me into its banal setting and humdrum firefights.

Bethesda's marketing hype insists on the novelty of the game's 'NASApunk' identity and promised this expansion would build that out, but I remain unsold. It's not innovative enough to be confused for NASA, and it doesn't say enough to be confused for punk. *Shattered Space* drew the most emotion out of me when its occult houses reminded me of *Morrowind*, a world that feels substantially more alien and provides the player more agency without a single starship on offer.

Shattered Space delivers a few more hours' worth of the game you're familiar with. If, like me, you've been waiting for *Starfield* to go boldly where it hasn't gone before, you've got some more waiting to do. ■

A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

But Va'ruun's three houses will have to do



HOUSE KA'DIC
Cold and calculating, this house is willing to get its hands dirtier than most; that must be why they heard you out, player character.



HOUSE VETH'AAL
Not quite zealots, these firm devotees of the Great Serpent are legendarily committed to the bit (perhaps to their detriment).



HOUSE DUL'KHEF
They say if you want to make money, start a religion, and House Dul'khef heard the call of duty.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Shattered Space seems largely content to tread water, leaving *Starfield* the same mixed bag it always was.

60

OK BUILDER

SATISFACTORY is the new titan in building and crafting games

By Jon Bolding

I'm knee-deep in a swamp doing the maths for aluminium production: three miners pulling ore means I'll need six pumps for water, pushing out about 420 cubic meters of alumina solution per minute, which needs a big holding tank – so I slap one down and climb up on it. Now above the treeline I can see the sheer scale of what I've organised and built in the last 50-or-so hours.

I can see the towering field of nuclear reactor cooling towers about two kilometres off pumping up gentle white clouds. Past that there's the cliffside facility, tiny at this distance, that I set up 20 hours ago as my first aluminium plant. And

above it all I can see the top of my main factory complex, peeking over a jungle-covered ridge some five kilometres away. At the centre of it all is a massive space elevator, its cable

stretching upward to the megaproject in the heavens. It's an exhilarating feeling knowing you planned, built and executed all of it. True to its name, this is a factory-building game that's simply satisfying.

Dumped onto an unexplored alien world, your job as a pioneer for FICSIT Inc is to use advanced technology to build up an industrial base capable of sending various parts skyward to complete the mysterious

Project Assembly. Your work is all overseen by detached artificial intelligence ADA – who says it's for the survival of the human race, but seems more interested in mysterious alien artefacts than saving lives.

Satisfactory takes the basic trappings and open-world setting of the first-person survival genre and blends it with the flow of factory building and automation. You will always need a few hundred or a few

thousand of some finished product and you'll need to build and connect chains of resource gathering, processing, and finishing machines to get there. To build those you'll first need to scout out the terrain, evading or battling hostile wildlife for those resources and the optimal space to place those machines.

A simple setup might take ore from a deep-bore miner, move it to an array of smelters, take the metal

Your job as a pioneer for FICSIT Inc is to use advanced technology

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A factory building survival-craft adventure

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50

DEVELOPER
Coffee Stain Studios

PUBLISHER
Coffee Stain Publishing

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900,
32GB RAM, AMD
Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
satisfactorygame.com



ingots into constructors to stamp them into panels and rods and screws before connecting those parts into a framework in a larger assembler. Set up a half-dozen machines and you'll quickly have a few hundred frames to deliver and unlock a new tier of tech.

Larger goals, like main objective Project Assembly, require a few thousand of much more complex parts sourced from several different ores and a half-dozen different machines in different orders. Those get fed into the massive early goal: a space elevator. The luxurious animation for this thing has one of my all-time favourite non-cinematic sequences in a game, as a massive tether comes falling down out of the sky to hook into the base you've built.

MEGAPROJECTS

Undertaking these megaprojects means building a lot, and scaling it up, and up, and up. One thing *Satisfactory* understands is scale. Your first few machines are boxy, the size of a small car or lorry, but by the third and fourth tiers of unlocked technology you're placing house-sized coal power plants, refineries with towering smokestacks the size of a block of flats, and railway stations the size of an aircraft hangar. And you're doing it by the dozens! A reasonable oilfield will have something like 60 refineries running to make plastic, rubber and fuel oil. Each of them the size of a house, connected by a maze of pipes and conveyors. To make room for mine, and the train infrastructure that served it, I simply paved over most of a lake biome called Blue Crater with concrete-and-steel foundation squares.

For all that scale, *Satisfactory* doesn't neglect detail. One of my favourite bits, the mining machines, are all set up so that they drill ever-deeper. A lesser game might just let that drill sink into the ground in the initial animation and never think of it again. Not *Satisfactory*, though,

WELCOME TO MASSAGE-2 (A-B)B

Here are some of the unfriendly inhabitants



FLUFFY-TAILED HOG
These armoured, temperamental herbivores just love to butt heads.



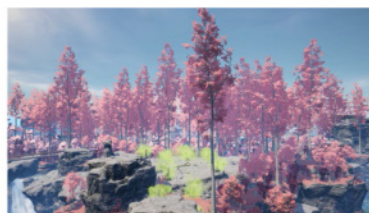
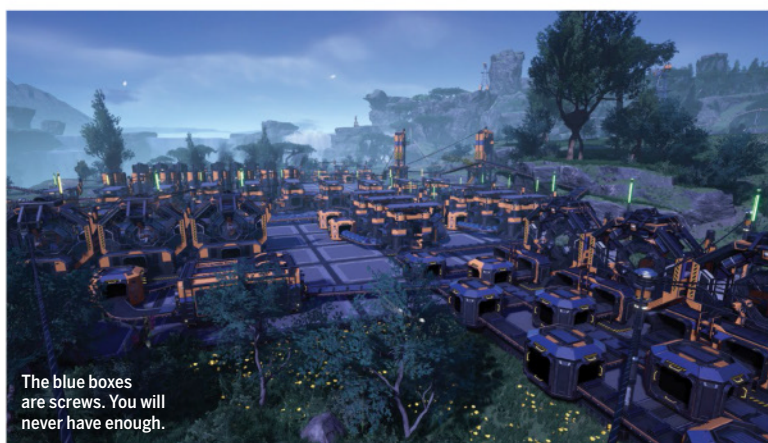
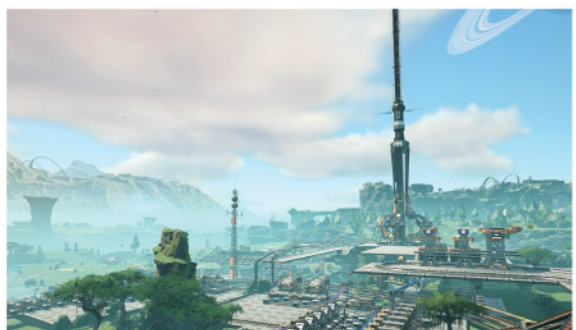
SPITTER
The spitter's a spicy one, with the power to generate and fire plasma blasts.



CRABS
These friends spawn from their little hatchers before swarming you for hugs.



STINGER
The stinger is a inhabitant of caves. Pictured here with arachnophobia mode turned on.



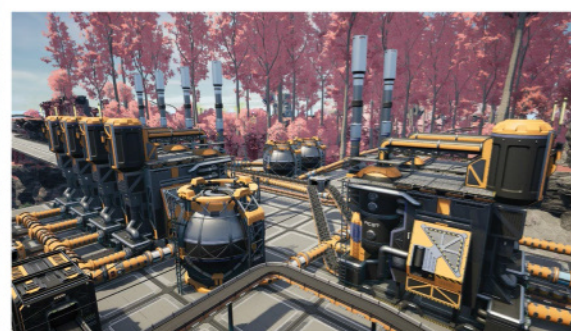
ABOVE: Yes, there are trains. Yes, there are signals.

BELOW: The beginnings of a large-scale steel mill.





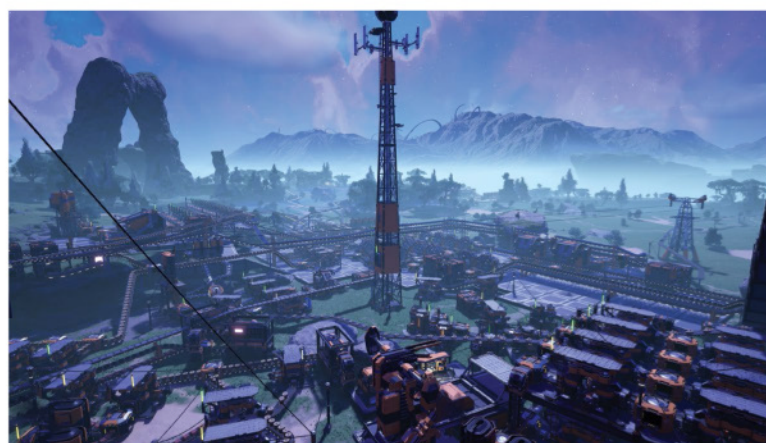
The building tools allow for some very nice structures.



RIGHT: The humble power slug is a valuable resource.



BELOW: I call this factory aesthetic 'hurried reviewer spaghetti'.



which makes sure that all the miners have an elaborate animation adding new segments to the drill shaft.

Actually building factories is done in first-person by placing blueprints that you can either drop freehand or snap onto a grid of foundations that you've built. That means setting up and placing kilometre after kilometre of, at first, conveyor belts, then truck roadways, then train tracks, even a network of flying delivery drones. But always the conveyor belts, to be clear. Everything you build will want to be connected, manually, to your growing web of sprawl at the correct ratios and speeds.

The strongest critique of *Satisfactory* I have is that at times this means you do things that are pretty tedious. You'll spend lots of time connecting a swathe of new buildings to your factory, attaching power lines to each, clicking the in and out ports for conveyors, connecting the conveyors to mergers and so on. It is dull compared to the simple click and drag that other factory games manage from their top-down perspectives.

Satisfactory is packed with things to do, sure, but some of that stuff is going to be repetitive, a product of the survival craft DNA that suffuses it. This is the one part that can drag, and to compensate I'd recommend playing this thing in co-op. It works great, in my experience, and each new player adds more than double the efficiency to the team.

Which is totally something you can do. Maybe even more than it's about automation, *Satisfactory* is about the process of building up all this stuff and enjoying yourself as you do it. While other factory games can become detached from creation as you plop down yet another iteration of your best blueprint, building in a three-dimensional space means that you instead adapt your design to the constraints of terrain. If I didn't have that big open lake to build my refinery on, it might have made more sense to pump all my oil into tanker cars and haul it somewhere easier to build. All of its tools and automation challenges are designed around considering how to fit what you need in the terrain you have.

The side-effect of how much *Satisfactory* emphasises the joy of

building big stuff is that there's a ton of parts to unlock and use for decoration, as well as colour and texture customisation. Enjoying how good everything looks is a big part of it! The planet of MASSAGE-2 (A-B)b is characterfully designed, with some beautifully stunning vistas, and every inch of the hefty (47km²) map has

clearly been made by someone on purpose. It puts the massive, yet bland, open worlds of some other survival games to shame.

Because making and customising an efficient factory is only a part of *Satisfactory*: the other

big part is exploring the world you're in to find stuff that'll help you along the way. At its most basic this is finding new resources, but you can find more exotic stuff out there – like glowing slugs that can be reduced into Power Shards to turbocharge your factory buildings. It's as elegant a design solution as I've ever seen.

COLLECTATHON

There are also alien artefacts and remnants scattered in hidden places around the world, adding an element of the collectathon to your survival experience. These are strange, unsettling objects of alien geometry:

It's a breezily entertaining sci-fi romp that smartly unfolds

I GET AROUND

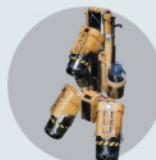
How fun it is to move around this world



BLADE RUNNERS
This leg-enhancing prosthesis lets you do what I call 'factory parkour'.



ZIPLINE
A toy that turns your factory's overhead electric wires into a transit system.



JETPACK
Jetpack go fwoosh. Keep well fuelled to avoid surprise falls.



TRACTOR
A little companion for brave pioneers. Can drive itself on routes you set.



TRUCK
This thunderous beast is perfect for hauling supplies to distant projects.



EXPLORER
The sporty explorer is the high-speed, high-style pioneer's best friend.

artefacts like glowing void-eyed Mercer Spheres and Somersloops, a kind of crystalline ouroboros. Both of which feed back into your factory-building experience by letting you unlock weird alien upgrades.

Unlocking upgrades and finding alien stuff are where most of *Satisfactory*'s light storytelling comes in, narrated by ADA when you unlock upgrades and find artefacts. ADA's light on relating what's really going on, instead urging you to keep working more and better with a mix of faint praise, bad robot jokes and unsubtle jabs. "FICSIT's predictions indicate pioneers should generally reach this point faster with above-average results, but we should all adjust our expectations according to the situation," they drone as you complete one project phase.

The story hinges around the disturbing implications of the alien technology you find, as well as your own mute, amnesiac protagonist's relationship with the tongue-in-cheek dystopian capitalist FICSIT organisation. It's not winning narrative awards, but it's also not overbearing. It's a breezily entertaining sci-fi romp that smartly unfolds despite the unpredictable order of an open world, and delivers some good goosebump-inducing phrases to boot. "Our bones are more beautiful than yours," intones a glitchy alien voice at one point, apropos of nothing.

Sci-fi story and trappings aside, *Satisfactory* never takes itself so seriously that it stops providing you with tools to play with and bend the rules – like mercifully letting buildings and conveyors clip into each other if you don't mind the aesthetic sacrifice. For all that the factory-building genre is about balancing input and output rates with conveyor belt loads, *Satisfactory* remembers that videogames are also supposed to be satisfying and silly. You get a half dozen weird ways to move around the world. It turns your building game into a theme park all its own, where you can turn this colourful alien landscape into a work of your imagination. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Satisfactory is a masterfully made game for crafters, builders and factory managers of all kinds.

90

HELL YES

DIABLO IV: VESSEL OF HATRED is a transformative expansion

By Tyler Colp

In a little over a year since its release, *Diablo IV* transformed from a decent action-RPG into one of the best, a post-launch metamorphosis that few games can pull off so swiftly. After realising players didn't want to go on a months-long journey to click demons until they pop, Blizzard took everything they didn't like about it and made them better. And it worked: *Diablo IV* is easily one of the best action-RPGs of the last decade.

Its first expansion, *Vessel of Hatred*, marks the end of its redemption arc and the start of its vision for the future. That vision includes a brighter, more expressive *Diablo IV* than before, one where its story isn't so bleak that it borders on parody (an overcorrection after complaints that *Diablo III* was too cartoonish), and one where everyone gets an inventory's worth of toys to play with as they ascend to demon-slaying god status.

Having more human characters by your side doesn't rob *Diablo* of its darkness, it enhances it, lending relief and contrast to the campaign's most horrific moments. I never would've thought I'd play a *Diablo* game where my character earnestly tells their

friend that they don't have to do this alone. *Vessel of Hatred* follows up the original campaign with a much more compassionate story about your character and their journey to help Neyrelle carry the burden of having a demon lord on her shoulder, and though it's shorter, it's far better told.

This is a fun exercise in carefully constructing a character

BETTER TOGETHER

Companionship isn't just a theme in *Vessel of Hatred*'s story, it's also core to a lot of what the expansion brings to

the game. Mercenaries are back from *Diablo II* and *III*, and this time they're a group of exiled misfits who can aid you in combat. I brought the bloodthirsty Varyana along with me for her stacking movement speed increase from killing several enemies

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A massive update and expansion to the dark fantasy action RPG

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Blizzard

PUBLISHER

Blizzard

REVIEWED ON

RTX 4090, Intel Core i9 12900K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

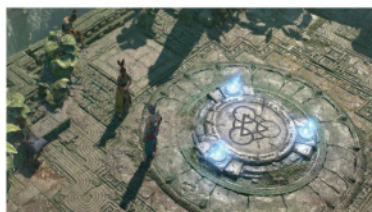
LINK

diablo4.blizzard.com

in a row, and assigned my main attack to call in Raheir to protect me with passive damage reduction. I couldn't live without them, if even just to hear them occasionally make remarks after combat.

These little sparks of humour and warmth balanced out the amplified horrors of *Vessel of Hatred*'s corrupted jungle and new dungeons. Sections of Nahantu are drenched in tar and filled with undulating, tentacled abominations. It's disgusting and over-the-top in exactly the way a *Diablo* game should be. And it would've been a lot more scary if I wasn't playing a spiritborn, the expansion's flexible new melee class. Boss fights with a class that can summon spiritual animal gods out of thin air are like *Pokémon* battles, and I get to light up the screen by throwing electrified eagle feathers and fiery jaguar slashes. The spiritborn are my new favourite class.

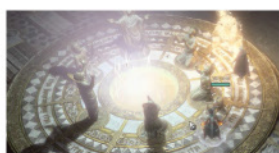
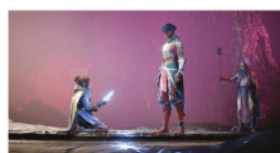
As you gather up powerful legendary items that augment your skills, like one that makes your spiritborn's eagle feathers ricochet off walls, you start to make decisions about survivability as you raise the game's difficulty for increased



ABOVE: The intro sequence to the expansion, and the city of Kurast, are visual delights.



Characters spend a lot more time just talking in the expansion.



TOP: Mephisto is still a presence but isn't the focus.

FAR RIGHT: Blizzard continues to knock it out of the park with its cinematics.

rewards. This presents you with a tricky problem to solve that can have you changing your entire build around a single piece of gear. In another, more fussy game, this would be tedious, but in *Diablo IV* this is a fun exercise in carefully constructing a character around your own approach to the game.

That's why I keep playing *Diablo IV* and have no plans to stop with *Vessel of Hatred*. The more time I put into it, the more intricate ways I can customise my build reveal themselves. *Vessel of Hatred* sprinkles even more exciting loot and skills into the mix, including a spiritborn chestpiece that drains your health to make your cooldowns shorter. If *Diablo IV* hadn't put so much effort into making all of this satisfying, I wouldn't be logging in every season.

The *Vessel of Hatred* expansion demonstrates that Blizzard isn't out of ideas on how to improve it further – even on the narrative side of things. Its willingness to stretch what *Diablo* could be is what impresses me most and the trust it's earned along the way makes me confident about its future and thrilled to be along for the ride. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Vessel of Hatred brings excellent writing, creative loot, and a smorgasbord of expressive, exciting action to *Diablo IV*.

90



MEPHISTO
How long do you think she can survive?

SPIRIT PALS

The spiritborn's distinct playstyles



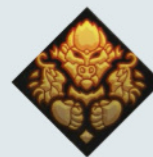
JAGUAR

Jaguar skills burn with ferocity, giving you rapid attack speed and swift attacks.



EAGLE

Eagle skills are about high mobility and electrified feathers that slice through enemies.



GORILLA

Gorilla skills smash enemies and reinforce you with passive damage reduction.



CENTIPEDE

Centipede skills infect monsters with poison and invigorate you with self-healing.

ATTACK ON TITANS

FINAL FANTASY XVI is a darker, more streamlined take on the series

By Daniella Lucas

When you picture what a *Final Fantasy* game is, what does your mind jump first to? Shiny, pretty landscapes? Even prettier hair? Cute little creatures? *Final Fantasy XVI* really doesn't fit that mould. With high-stakes action combat and a much darker tone, *FFXVI* flips all of your expectations upside down.

The world of Valisthea feels as grubby as *Game of Thrones*. Both have medieval(-ish) worlds full of warring nobles vying for power with a cruel approach to their citizens' welfare, and both face impending doom – in *Final Fantasy XVI*'s case, a blight that is draining life and magic from the world, slowly consuming it and leaving it barren. While there absolutely are areas of verdant nature, with idyllic countryside and villages, as well as bombastic castles dripping with might and right, as you would expect from a *Final Fantasy* game, much of the landscape here is a lifeless wilderness, and that helps sets the tone for what is to come.

Those who can use magic without the aid of crystals are feared and marked as Bearers – forced to work as slaves and perform menial tasks

such as drying laundry with their gifts. However, a select few are chosen as Dominants, and can channel transformative, god-like beings known as Eikons in the form of classic series summons such as

Shiva and Titan. When Dominants transform into these Eikons it is truly a sight to behold, and when there is combat between them, spectacular fun is to be had. Of course, this being a *Final Fantasy* game, there is another,

greater threat waiting in the wings to introduce itself.

Brooding protagonist Clive (who 100 percent typifies the 'I'm dead inside' haunted protagonist archetype) must navigate it all to uncover what happened to his younger brother – the Dominant of the fire bird Phoenix – all those years ago, face his past, and see where that takes his future. After a chance

Those who can use magic without the aid of crystals are feared

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Another RPG in a long-running and diverse series

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 630

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shorturl.at/ijfw9

meeting he sets about working to free Bearers (essentially magical slaves) and master his own Eikon gifts. It makes for a compelling tale of revenge and personal growth in the face of death and hopelessness, with actor Ben Starr doing an excellent job of performing Clive's bitter grumbles.

A STRONG CAST

Even better is Ralph Inneson, who steals the show as Cid, the Dominant of Ramuh. The two often enjoy some gravelly banter while cutting their way through dangerous wildlife and enemy soldiers, their friendship turning into a bit of a bromance that carries you through the first half of the game. You also encounter plenty of memorable NPCs on your journey, such as Charon the Shrewd, an elderly merchant who delights in insulting you, and Gav, a scout with a heart of gold, a low tolerance for alcohol, and a lovely accent.

While most characters enjoy comparable depth, the starring women do feel wasted by comparison to the men, and fall into tired archetypes. There's the ice queen mother of Clive and Joshua who only cares about pure bloodlines, the powerful Benedicta – Dominant of Garuda – who just gets to die to compel a man's plot along, and finally Jill – the Dominant of Shiva and childhood friend of Clive and Joshua – who despite all her power largely plays the role of damsel in distress. In a less character-driven game it might not be so noticeable, but when the male characters are all enjoying fully-formed, complex existences, it feels like a missed opportunity that the female characters are so half-baked. This feeling is enhanced when you consider female characters in other *Final Fantasy* games, including the current *Final Fantasy VII* remakes, have had much better treatment in this regard.

Still, as an ensemble it really works, the developing camaraderie of Clive and his ragtag band of outcasts

BESTEST BOY

Torgal is gaming's new top dog

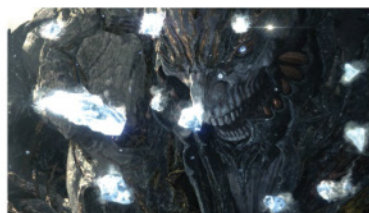


1 PETS
To be a top dog you need perfect petting points – just look how scratchable those fluffy ears are.

2 SIC 'EM BOY
Handy in a battle, Torgal can turbo-somersault enemies to death and heal Clive with a howl in battle.

3 ACCESSORIES
Only the cleverest of boys knows how to rock an anklet, making Torgal the perfect all-rounder.

Ralph Inneson shines as Cid, the Dominant of Ramuh.



FAR LEFT: Eikon battles can be explosive spectacles.

LEFT: Shiva faces off against Titan.



Combat is fast, with melee and ranged attacks.



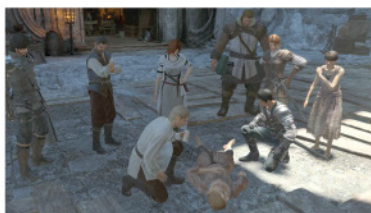
Shiva the Warden of Ice, and Eikon of Jill Warrick.



RIGHT: Antagonist Hugo Kupka is the Dominant of Titan, the Warden of Earth.



BELOW: Certain segments of the game take place in the past with a younger Clive.



Clive lets rip with one of his super deadly farts.



Sunrise, Sunset
Make for the throne room

B1y

Animal Instic

Main Me

Jun

giving the game's story a compelling emotional throughline. I often found myself completing menial sidequests purely because they'd give me opportunities to learn more about each character and deepen the bonds between them. That shows that despite some underwhelming and underwritten female characters the dev team did understand the *Final Fantasy* brief, where forming bonds with characters over your adventures is core to the experience.

WORLD BUILDING

While Valisthea's lore helps to ground it and make it feel like a real, functioning place, it can also seem empty. The map is made up of several zones, and you'll spend most of the game hopping to and fro as you sally forth from your central hideout. This is done in a mostly linear fashion, though, and exploration is limited, with not much incentive to stray off the beaten path. Rewards for doing so tend to be minimal, and while there are sidequests that include some of those small character moments, in terms of what you're actually doing they're largely just glorified fetch quests.

It's also missing a lot of traditional *Final Fantasy* trappings that normally help add colour – Chocobos and Moogles do exist (though the latter only gets one showing) but there are no beguiling minigames to distract you, and the series references that are present feel so subtle only dedicated fans will spot them. In this regard, this is a streamlined *Final Fantasy* experience, one that leans on

storytelling and combat. Speaking of combat, *FFXVI* also fully drops the turn-based systems of previous entries in the series, such as the *FFVII* remakes, and goes for completely real-time action combat. Even compared to *XV*, which gestured in a similar direction, it's much closer to a full-on brawler than

You're able to use a combo of melee and ranged attacks

a typical JRPG. You're able to use a combo of melee and ranged attacks, as well as three sets of powerful Eikon abilities that you can mix and match to your liking. Closing the gap with a fiery dash and following it up with

a winged uppercut, or taking out crowds with a perfectly placed lightning blast is brilliantly satisfying. Mechanically it might not feel like a traditional *Final Fantasy*, but its visual flourishes feel very in-keeping, with plumes of flames and dark slices following your sword strikes.

You'll spend most of the game cutting your way through basic enemies and the odd tougher monster, but it's the boss battles with the other Eikons where the combat really shines. Each one changes the landscape and bombards you with attacks at a gigantic scale, eventually transforming into what is effectively a kaiju battle between gods.

CINEMATIC GRANDEUR

The grand scale of them has me sweating up my controller and swearing to myself in awe as dramatic music swells and Clive is dodging mountain-sized hands or having a shoot-out in space. *FFXIV* players may do a bit of a double-take

at some reused fight mechanics, but that shouldn't come as much of a surprise given that the two development teams shared a lot of staff. Masayoshi Soken is also responsible for the music of both games, leading to an impressive mix of classic *Final Fantasy* themes mixed in with rock and pulsing electronica.

If action isn't your thing there is a story-focused difficulty mode and, arguably even more useful to tailoring the game to your skill level, in-game accessories that you can equip that will help Clive dodge (before an enemy strikes, combat is momentarily slowed) or perform complicated combos with ease (reduced to just pressing a single button in a generous time window). However, if you're looking for a challenge, you'll need to complete the game once to unlock the much tougher *Final Fantasy* mode... or just look out for mods to shortcut the process.

I played this PC port on a rig that sits at the lower end of the game's settings, so I did face stuttering in some cutscenes and the edges of finer details looking a bit jagged. While I did have to drop my settings to mid and occasionally even to low in some of the more graphically intense areas (even those with high-end PCs will see their rigs pushed hard, and especially so at a 4K resolution and max settings), crucially the action didn't suffer and inputs remained smooth even when looking a bit messy.

Playing through, I felt myself constantly torn between loving the pace of combat and a lot of the story beats, and feeling disappointed that there isn't much else to it – no hidden secrets and exploration like other *Final Fantasy* games. Compared to the likes of *FFVII: Remake*, its grand adventure does feel like it's missing something that would tip it over into truly epic. That hasn't stopped it earning a place in my personal top 10 of the series, though. It's not perfect, but the story it tells combined with the soundtrack and combat still make it a standout entry – a worthy sequel for long-time fans, and an accessible way in for newcomers. ■

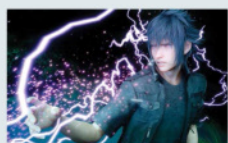
ENDLESS FANTASY

Other top *Final Fantasy* games to play on PC today



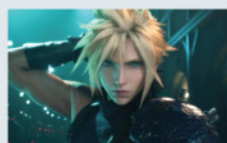
FFXIV ONLINE

With its latest expansion, *Dawntrail*, scoring well and injecting a load of new content into the game, *FFXIV Online* continues to be the MMO of choice for *Final Fantasy* fans.



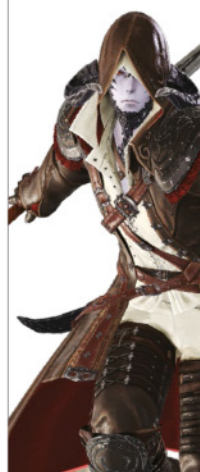
FINAL FANTASY XV

Released on Steam with a technically impressive Windows edition that offers ultra high-resolution graphics and HDR options, this entry is full of quality combat, cars and characters.



FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE INTERGRADE

The first instalment in the technically impressive and high-scoring *Final Fantasy VII* remake project, this PC version is the definitive version of the famous JRPG.



PC GAMER VERDICT

A darker take on *Final Fantasy*, *Final Fantasy XVI* has great combat and a moving story, albeit not much else.

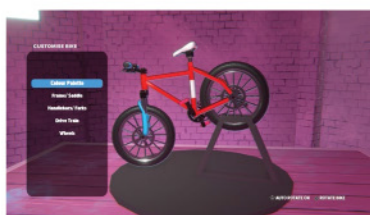
79



ABOVE: Doughnut-selling man has a doughnut for a head. The pizza-seller has pizza for a face.

FAR RIGHT: Here's your copy of PC Gamer magazine, uh, officer?

BELOW: No road is closed to the dedicated cycle courier.



COURIER BOLD

PARCEL CORPS' sideways look at work amuses, but not for long

By Ian Evenden

France bans work emails after 2pm. Sounds like a pretty good idea, especially if it also includes Slack messages, carrier pigeons, people yelling out of office doors and, most horrifying of all, phone calls. Add to this your mandatory lunch break an hour (or so) earlier, and it sets up the perfect afternoon in the corporate hellscape we inhabit. It also nicely encapsulates *Parcel Corps'* attitude to earning the money that keeps us in food, shelter and PC games.

That line comes from the game's intro, and it's indicative not only of the game's attitude but the attention to detail from Northern Ireland-based developer Billy Goat Entertainment. The dev itself has an office in the tutorial. There's a restaurant chain called CBA Mondays. This sort of stuff is everywhere, and it's the satirical citybuilding that Rockstar gets so much applause for, only without the dick jokes.

WELL-MUSCLED

You play as a well-muscled person with a predilection for tight clothing, chosen from three different courier firms. Despite the cars and buses that circle the city, occasionally honking or flashing you when you get too close, your bicycle is your only method of transport. Strapped to your back is a pack like something out of Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding*, from which you can pull new bikes in the event of a crash, getting you back on the pedals quickly – an important thing in a game with a lot of timed missions.

Your bike has extremely good brakes, and these are key to the way you move around the city. Turns require a tap, a slide will get you round more quickly and hammering both triggers will bring you to a sharp halt, especially useful for drawing up outside businesses to collect or deliver packages. You can also bunny-hop, wall slide and grind rails, bringing a *Jet Set Radio* feel to the whole thing.

BIKE TO THE FUTURE

Ramps have been built in potentially dangerous locations, lorries parked just so that you can slide under them, large piles of building materials left in positions that must surely break health and safety laws, and building sites you can ride across thanks to gaps in the chain-link fence. It leads to the memorisation or improvisation of the most efficient routes

across the city – that timer on the left of the screen always sharpens the desire to shave a few seconds off. This is compounded by the fact that you're a streamer as well as a courier, a stream of likes ticks away, your clout increasing as you pull wheelies, do stunts, and take risks.

After you've done enough jobs for local businesses (often accompanied

**There are
digs at
Nintendo and
Ikea in the first
area alone**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cycle courier game that wants to be a satirical cartoon

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Billy Goat Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Secret Mode

REVIEWED ON
AMD Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
billygoat.tv/
parcelcorps

by an amusing conversation with their owner to break things up a bit, there are digs at Nintendo and Ikea in the first area alone) you'll be asked to participate in a Delivery Rush event, in which you need to increase your rep by carrying out yet more timed challenges. After this, new parts of the city unlock, and the loop begins again, along with a world-saving plot involving a villainous oil exec to liven things up. Aiding you in your deliveries is your phone, which offers the usual mix of maps, messages and a *Snake* game, or you can get some downtime at the cyclists' hub, which also functions as a multiplayer lobby and cosmetic customisation workshop.

PERFORMANCE PATCH

This review benefits from the patch put out a week following the initial release. V98.9 not only improves performance and fixes bugs, but adds graphics options that weren't there before. It's not much – texture detail presets, MSAA levels, V-sync and motion blur toggles plus a proper fullscreen mode – and performance on an RTX 3080 hovered around 50-60fps at 4K and the highest settings, but punctuated this with a few unexplained pauses, lots of clipping through objects, and floating NPCs. The game is marked as playable on the Steam Deck, which bodes well for its scalability on lower-end systems.

It's a repetitive game, and can struggle to jumble up its building blocks enough to maintain attention for its 15-hour runtime. But with its Sega blue skies and general Dreamcast vibe, *Parcel Corps* is a fun dose of brightness at an otherwise dour time of year. ■

BIKER GANGS

The three teams hoping to dominate the courier business



DAS-LA POST
European courier firm Das-la Post wear the kind of Lycra outfits that would make a lesser cyclist weep.



THE WALLABY WHEELERS
The Wallaby Wheelers are a scrappy Australian bunch with the best beards in the city.



EAST COAST COURIERS
Brooklyn-born East Coast Couriers bring a bit of New York sass to the delivery business.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Billy Goat Entertainment's *Parcel Corps* is a great spin on an old idea, but can struggle to deliver.

68

POLICE PROCEDURAL

SHADOWS OF DOUBT will turn you into a true detective

By Joshua Wolens

Shadows of Doubt is a procgen immersive sim that's a love letter both to noir crime fiction and any videogame that's ever had an 0451 code in it. Its voxelised cities are shrouded in darkness even at midday, and every building is connected by a network of traversable air ducts the game spins up when you load in.

You're a PI: a private dick with no money, no flex and a police scanner, picking up murders and kidnappings the corrupt local cops won't solve and piecing them together yourself for cash and social credit – a gamified class system that confers perks and privileges on a rarefied few as they ascend the ladder. Climb high and you get the ultimate prize: retirement.

But really, why retire? Your city, which you generate at the start of the game and which can be anywhere from a few buildings to a sprawling block filled with 600-or-so people, never stops being a pleasure to live in. *Shadows of Doubt* gets a lot of things right, but I don't think I loved anything more than I loved the experience of just wandering its streets, flats and hallways. This is a game which knows vibe, from the rain hammering on the glass of an eerily silent apartment to the tannoy blaring ads in the streets to the discomfiting whirr of a security camera in an unlit room. It knows

exactly when to spin up its sparse, synthy soundtrack and when to let diegetic sound do the talking.

BODIES PILED UP

Excellent news in any game, of course, but especially for an immersive sim. We might define these games by their (variability of) approach, but all the true greats are just as much about their locations as what you can do in them. Carnaca in *Dishonored*

2, Prague in *Mankind Divided*, Talos 1 in *Prey*: they all had the sense of place necessary to make you want to explore them, to dig into every nook and cranny, and to linger in your mind long after you left. *Shadows of Doubt* manages to do the same despite having – I can only assume – far fewer resources.

It does fall short of those other places in some ways. How could it not? Where Arkane and co have entire teams of writers and designers to handcraft narratives and sprinkle

Depends on its procgen systems and pre-made narratives

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A procgen immsim starring a PI. Potentially other abbreviations too

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
ColePowered Games

PUBLISHER
Fireshine Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/986130/Shadows_of_Doubt

them purposefully around the map, *Shadows of Doubt* is an indie game that depends on its procgen systems and pre-made narrative scaffolding to generate stories.

On the one hand, that means the game will sometimes hand you side gigs you can't reasonably solve. I took gigs that would tell me to hunt someone down based only on details like their shoe size and blood type. Unless I wanted to break into the homes of all 300+ people in the city and scan their shoes, I didn't have much choice but to abandon the investigation. That's less of a complaint than it sounds: you just ditch the case – which incurs no penalty – and pick up another, but it happens enough that it gets tedious.

It also means you encounter a lot of the same props over and over again. You'll find the same "Watch your back, rat!" note at multiple murder scenes. Take a side job (available on cork boards in bars and restaurants for you to pick up between murders and kidnappings) to investigate a spouse's infidelity, and you'll find that their love letters to their paramour read identically to those of the last two cheaters you caught in the act. And so on. It meant that while I never grew tired of my city, it did grow very familiar, and I ran into my fair share of déjà vu.

JOIN THE DOTS

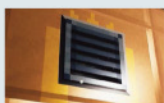
Threading links onto the game's caseboard is a catnip concept to me, and it works. Scouring crime scenes for clues, adding them all to your conspiracy board, and sorting the pertinent wheat from the irrelevant chaff will have you feeling like a proper sleuth, especially when you stumble upon a novel way of trapping your quarry. Take, for instance, my side job to hunt down someone's stolen diamond necklace. The only real details I had were a single fingerprint and the victim's assertion that it must have been someone he knew.

MEANS OF INGRESS

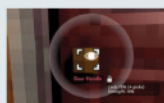
A crafty detective finds any way in



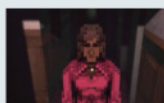
THE SAM FISHER
Just find a local junction box to kill the security and lights around a crime scene, then slip in during the confusion.



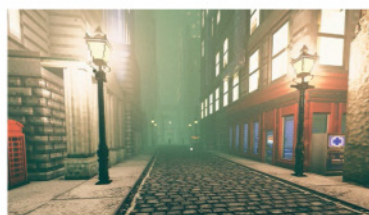
THE TV DINNER
This is an immersive sim, after all. Wherever you want to be, there's almost certainly a vent that leads in.



THE GARRETT
Why muck about? If you've got lockpicks spare, just crack the door that way. Make sure no one sees, though.



THE I GIVE UP
If the worst comes to the worst, you can just knock and ask if anyone minds you looking around. It works quite often.

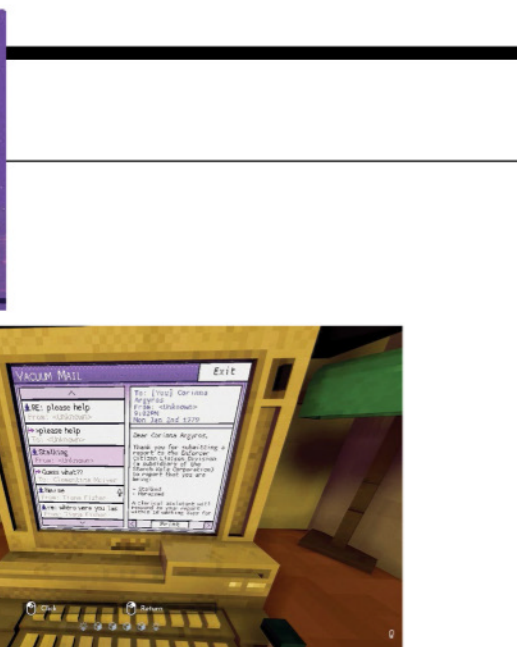


LEFT: Pounding pavements late at night, the PI's bread and butter.

FAR LEFT: Yet another new subscriber to PC Gamer magazine requesting the latest issue.



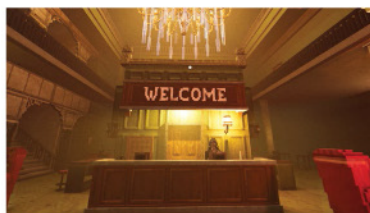
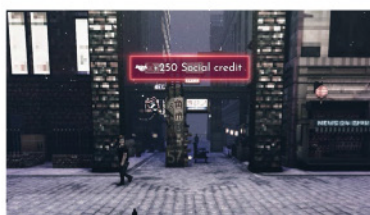
This is a game that knows vibes.



ABOVE: You'll have to deal with statuses like hunger and thirst.

RIGHT: Service guarantees citizenship.

ABOVE RIGHT: Often the devil is in the detail when cracking a case, so pay attention.



The murder sites get pretty eerie, even with voxel graphics.

☞ If I'd wanted, I could have gone through his address book, pinned the names of everyone he knew to my board, cross-referenced those names against the city directory to find their addresses, and broken into to all of their flats one-by-one to dust for matching prints and maybe even stumble upon the missing jewellery.

A lot of effort. Why not start somewhere easier? Several of our victim's acquaintances lived in the same building, and there was one spot where a lot of their fingerprints would be gathered all together. I took the lift down to the ground floor and pointed my fingerprint scanner at the mailboxes. Ding ding ding! We had a matching print on the slot belonging to a neighbour. All I had to do was break into his flat to get back the valuables and I'd solved a case in minutes that could have taken an hour. Am I the greatest detective to ever live? It's hard to say. But yes. It's the immersive sim mantra of 'what would happen if I...?' applied to crime scene investigation, and it works.

Those moments of genius can give way to chaos at whiplash speed. You'll be methodically poking through an apartment for clues one moment before fleeing the cops the next. Plenty of crime scenes are guarded by cops who don't want you there. If they overhear you run across a floorboard or switch on a computer, they'll poke their head in. All of a

sudden you're wrenched from your mind palace and sprinting past the police, or smashing a window and leaping out, or taking them on in fisticuffs. As the city's one honest cop, you can never use guns as anything other than bludgeons to knock people out, a choice I love for preventing you from just shooting

your way out of problems. They can shoot you, mind. Good luck with that.

Moments of genius can give way to chaos at whiplash speed

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

There's a 'but' here, though. *Shadows of Doubt's* vision of

investigation is a pretty narrow one, revolving around forensics and other hard evidence rather than anything social. Catching the bad guy is always a matter of linking some identifying bit of evidence to a time and a place, you're never going to outwit them into revealing themselves. You can never be Columbo.

Because despite the clockwork city they all live in and all their unique details – everyone has a job, a schedule, a bedtime and rising time, as well as blood types and fingerprints and shoe sizes – the citizens you share your town with are never much more than 2D impressions of people. You get the same dialogue tree with everyone, and persuading them to give up details like their name or whether they've seen a particular person recently is just a matter of increasing

a bribe amount until they submit. Which isn't much of a sacrifice: money very quickly becomes meaningless as you finish your jobs.

The result is a city that breathes but does not live: its inhabitants go about their day, never changing their relationship with you or with each other. Honestly? From my own playthrough I remember places and events, but no people. Even if you take a baseball bat to one of them, they'll forget it ever happened as soon as you round the corner and shake their pursuit. If they remembered how I – and others – had wronged them and that influenced our later interactions? Then this would go from a game I really liked to a personal all-timer.

But that's a big ask, I know, and perhaps it's for the best that it's not in there. *Shadows of Doubt* is already running so many calculations about its citizens at all times that it chugs semi-frequently on my 3700x and RTX 4080-equipped PC, and that's with a medium-sized city. Trying to load up one of the super large, 600-person cities the game can spit out isn't really playable, at least for me. It's no slideshow, don't get me wrong, but it hitches so much and so often that it's just not worth enduring. If it was also constantly reconfiguring a set of relationship values I might be forced to only spin up cities of about ten people.

CASE CLOSED

Despite a few technical gripes, *Shadows of Doubt* is an impressive and unique addition to the immersive sim pantheon that manages to do a whole lot with relatively little. I'll definitely be pouring plenty more hours into it over the months and years to come, particularly if the developer keeps updating at anywhere near the pace it's managed over the game's early access period. I can't think of any other game that's made me feel like the sleuth this one does, nor one that's made me feel like as much of an idiot when I leap out of an eighth-story window to escape an angry squad of cops. You take the rough with the smooth, detective. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Detective sim and chaos-generator, *Shadows of Doubt* mostly lives up to its immsim influences.

83

TOOLS OF THE DETECTIVE

Augments your detective can unlock

1 FRAME
Height increased (or decreased) by 24%. Good luck getting through doors, detective.

2 BEAUTY
Citizens are 55% more likely to offer info up to a pulchritudinous PI.

3 CONSTITUTION
Our detective no longer gets cold, tired, or stinky. That's true freedom.



4 VIGOR
Farewell to fall damage. Tumble from any height, even 20 storeys up, and live to tell about it.

5 PUBLIC SERVICE
Creds for every public toilet you photograph. A fine line between detective and pervert.

6 TENACITY
No more bleeding and stronger punches. Like if the Terminator was a pacifist.

While its history is fictionalised, this is still a great way to reminisce about *Knightmare*.



FRONTIER PSYCHIATRY

FRONTIERS OF THE MIND reimagines a classic kids' show

Knightmare is one of those shows that can be quite difficult to explain, as it was basically a dungeon crawl shown on primetime kids TV. Its mixture of computer imagery, live actors, grisly traps and a team of children yelling "sidestep" could almost have existed just in someone's feverish imagination. It's been repurposed as such in the spooky *Frontiers of the Mind*, which takes *Knightmare* and adds unethical psychic experiments.

The show – fictionalised here as *Maze Masters* – has been broken down in extraordinary detail, from the basic setup to the paranormal experiments and nightmarish discoveries that were really going on behind the scenes. More than, say, *Fun House*, *Knightmare* is the perfect vessel for this sort of hauntological re-imagining, because it seems so unlikely that it ever existed in the first place.

As you click on categories, read faux-historical text and view doctored images from the actual *Knightmare*, it really feels like you've been handed a cursed CD-ROM from the Encyclopaedia Britannica era. Production stills, old paranormal book covers and tons of other

appropriate images have been painstakingly collected and lightly disfigured, and it's very hard to see the seams in the game's fictional production history.

Faces are blurred, names are changed, and the stranger elements of the show are given darker explanations, but never so much that this feels like an outright horror game. It's more like that part of a night out when you get onto the TV

shows you watched as kids, and you inevitably embellish their more idiosyncratic elements.

KNIGHT'S WORK

Will it mean much if you've never seen *Knightmare*? I can't answer that, although it would be an equally

interesting experience in reverse, I'd imagine – to watch the original *Knightmare* after this haunted reimagining. But purely as a standalone visual novel/text adventure, or whatever the hell this is, *Frontiers* is still worth the hour it takes to explore everything.

While most of the elements in its interactive gallery are drawn from *Knightmare*, that's not to diminish the intriguing lore that successfully holds it all together. Psychical research and unethical experiments, tulpas and shadow people are just a few things that were (probably) not a part of real-world *Knightmare*'s production. Your memory of it is as hazy as mine, so can we really be sure there wasn't an enormous floor-brain in one episode? It's such a creative use of existing material, hopefully inspiring others to pick up the baton. I can't wait to learn the cursed history behind *Bodger and Badger*. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A multimedia experience recounting the history of a fake kids show, based on actual *Knightmare*

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Minus One Publishing

PUBLISHER
Minus One Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/FrontiersMind

PC GAMER VERDICT

A creative game that injects nightmare fuel into *Knightmare*, re-remembering it as a cursed artefact of TV.

82

BELOW: It looks authentically retro.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Powerhoof

LINK
bit.ly/TerminalCity

FATAL VELOCITY

Type to survive in adventure game **TERMINAL CITY**

Makers of modern adventure games have largely decided to follow the LucasArts model rather than the Sierra one, meaning very few of them feature sudden, unforeseeable deaths. Sierra games would kill you just for crossing the street, for examining an object, so it's a good thing all that has gone away. Right?

Sure, it's less fraught, meaning you don't have to save the game constantly, but there was an enjoyably cruel wit to those inventive game-overs. *Terminal City* is a game of constant next times, turning the adventure game into a gauntlet where everyone, where everything, is out to get you. It's only seconds before your first test: a low pipe that you have to slide under, by typing DUCK (or one of its synonyms) at the appropriate moment.

This game stands out through its use of a text parser – you have to type every action you want to perform – and the fact that your character moves of their own accord. I lost count of the number of times I fumbled JIUMP instead of JUMP, causing my character to tumble down a pit. Sometimes you'll hit a dead end because you didn't know to get an item at the start of the game. And every time, you have to restart from the beginning. *Terminal City* is brisk and funny enough that this is not really a problem, but you can slow things down if you find the time limit too strict, which is helpful when figuring out puzzle solutions.

This is a game that bucks modern design trends – even doubling down on the unfairness with its time limit – but with a wit that makes the challenge irresistible. ■

74

CAMERA OBSCURA

PICTURE PERFECT turns funny pictures into clever puzzles

You know all those pictures of people seeming to lean on the Tower of Pisa, or hold monuments in the palms of their hands? Well it's all a matter of perspective, as you'll discover when you play this sweet, short puzzle game, which has you staging cute, Pisa-style photographs.

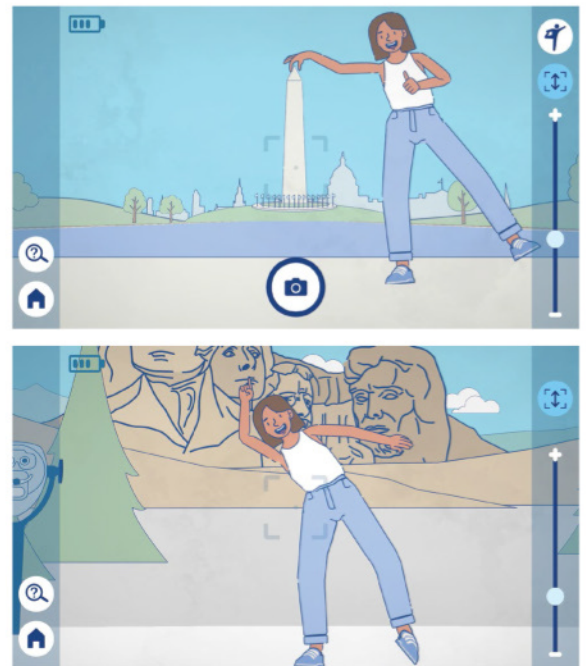
It's rare for a puzzle game to have no standout gimmick just the very real, but no less magical science of forced-perspective photography. In each scene, you're given a person and a landmark to capture, along with the outline of the necessary shot, and then you're left alone with your camera to recreate it.

How to turn the Washington Monument into a pluckable little baguette, or Mount Rushmore into a shelf of normal-sized heads? It's all about where the subject stands, as

well as where and how you/stand, and how much you're zoomed in. You might need to crouch down to bring the person and landmark closer together, for example, or to step way back to achieve the same effect. The controls and interface for managing all this are easy to grasp, if a little lacking in tactility and authentic visual effects – it doesn't truly feel like you're operating a camera.

But I did hugely enjoy solving these puzzles, which feel fresh and exciting, using real-world techniques to present a number of fun and breezily light-hearted scenarios, before capping it all off with a sweet finale. My only complaint is that this free game jam game stops just as it's getting going. It's too good an idea to just sit here, so fingers crossed that this landmark game will be expanded later down the line. ■

BELOW: Part of the process is selecting the funniest pose.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Incredulous Interactive

LINK
incredulous.itch.io

77

Have I accidentally included a screen from my collection of dental floss adverts? No.



SILENT BOB

How much I dislike **THE QUIET MAN**: an abridgement

The thing about re-reviewing loads of old games is that most of them are good in a boring way or bad in a boring way. I am pleased to report, then, that *The Quiet Man* is so terrible it surprises and delights me. It's a child's magic show where the cards are on fire and the doves all smashed.

You play as Dane: essentially a My Chemical Romance DLC costume for Jill Valentine. He's not so much a character, as a series of childhood traumas crammed inside some Doc Martens. We learn, through a series of narrative flashbacks, with all the grace of a washing machine in lingerie, that Dane's probably-mum was the victim of gangland violence. There's more to it than that, but who gives a witch's tit? Literally every episode of *Bluey* has more narrative value.

I am obliged at this point to point out that there is everything right about the idea of the game. It's a cool idea to have a differently-abled protagonist. PC gaming is smart and varied enough to do it justice. But *The Quiet Man* is like a medieval drawing of an elephant. It's like

someone, somewhere, described the concept of deafness and the game ran with it. Some of the parts are right – apparently the ASL is correct – but the complete picture is laughably, insultingly awful.

PAINKILLER DANE

Live-action footage is shot in a way that obscures faces

In trying to represent disability, the developers have instead decided to neuter every other remaining sense. There are scenes with text you're unable to read. Live-action footage is shot in a way that obscures faces. And all of the cutscenes are presented with the sound turned down, even when Dane is conversing with someone via lip reading or sign language. There's one six-minute scene in which he shares a whisky with his dapper gangland bestie that you just have to sit and watch in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The game that makes *Axe Cop* look like *Serpico*

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Square Enix, Human Head Studios

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/790540/THE_QUIET_MAN/

silence, even though Dane is having a conversation. Even Kojima wouldn't inflict that upon us. You're so detached from what little meaning the cutscenes possess that it's like watching someone else's shit life through the string glass eyes of the haunted doll your soul is trapped inside. It's so bad, in fact, that it's making me a conspiracy theorist: I almost believe the game was meant to have dialogue, but the direction was so wretched that they chose this mechanic to hide it.

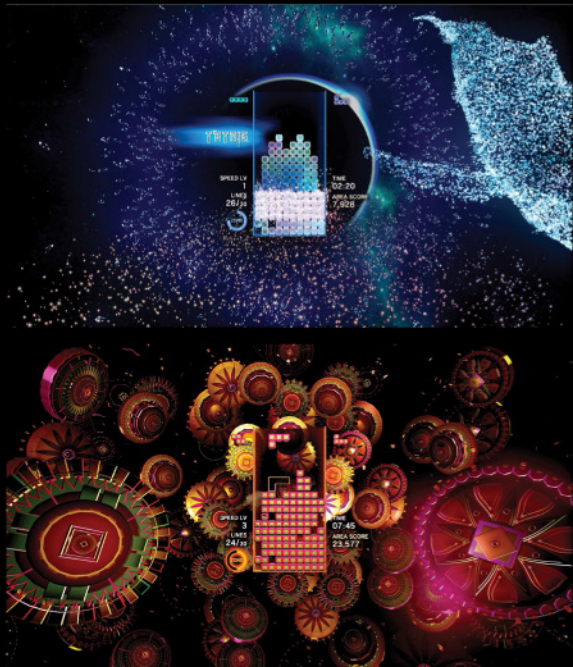
Honestly, I want to keep going. There's so much here to loathe. I want to tell you about how the shots of the love interest look like clumsy advertisements for feminine hygiene products. And the fighting, in which you kick the piss out of grim Latino stereotypes by pressing the left mouse button, like you're playing a MAGA version of *Cookie Clicker*. Alas, we are out of space. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

This is my life now. I tell strangers at checkouts how much I hate *The Quiet Man*. The person I used to be is gone.

32

BELOW: Honestly, screenshots don't come close to doing the game justice.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£31

DEVELOPER
Monstars Inc

PUBLISHER
Engage

BLOCK PARTY

The immediate brilliance of **THE TETRIS EFFECT**

It seems insensitive to follow a game about the absence of sound with a mesmerising aural masterpiece, but apparently that's exactly what I'm doing, like a cruel relative in a Roald Dahl story celebrating their favourite child. Eat your fish heads and stop crying, *The Quiet Man*. You're putting *Tetris Effect* off her Wagyu beef.

If it's any consolation, it's much easier to write about why *The Quiet Man* is terrible than why *Tetris Effect* is great. It's a game that has to be experienced, ideally in VR, to understand fully why it's so special. On the face of things, it's still just *Tetris*, which honestly, I really shouldn't have to explain to anyone. It still feels lovely to stack the blocks up. And it's uniquely rewarding when you slot the right tetromino into a space the lines disappear.

But the true joy here comes from the guiding hand of *Rez* developer Tetsuya Mizuguchi, who adds synesthesia to an already satisfying experience. Moving and spinning your blocks becomes part of the soundtrack, thanks to a series of whoops, ahhs and gentle cymbal plinks that you incorporate into each song. The mechanics of the game blend seamlessly with the soundtrack, filling in the gaps in my brain where musical talent should be. It's relaxing and exhilarating at the same time. And, even now, reading this back I feel like I've failed to express just how nice it feels to play. I weep for past generations who not only didn't get to experience the ephemeral joy of arranging blocks into lines, but also missed out on doing to the sort of soundtrack that will make you glad to be alive. ■

89

SOUND DEDUCTION

Listening for the truth in **UNHEARD**

Finally, we have *Unheard*, a game that's the direct opposite of *The Quiet Man* in that it's a) about using sound instead of visuals, b) playable and c) has a story that ChatGPT wouldn't be ashamed to share. Yes, I know I'm berating *The Quiet Man* again. I'll stop now.

Anyway! *Unheard*. You unravel mysteries by listening to sounds and conversations. The pitch is that you're an acoustic detective who returns to scenes of various crimes and pieces together exactly what happened. It's a thoughtful concept, and I especially like it because 'acoustic detective' sounds like the name of a band who'd be nominated for the Mercury Music Prize but probably not win. By replaying audio and moving around each level, you gradually piece together a mental

image of events. Sometimes subtle and surprising; other times, less so.

The design is deliberately simplistic, but it does add to the slightly budget feel. And considering that sound is the focus, the voice acting and dialogue often clangs in a way that seems like a sketch from *I Think You Should Leave*. The detective work holds up. The ambiguity of each scenario makes it feel like it's possible to mess everything up, and later cases do require an impressive degree of attention and care. At its best, *Unheard* feels like the Radio 4 version of the likes of *Obra Dinn* or *Outer Wilds*, which is about as powerful a complement as I'm able to pay. It doesn't quite coalesce into something breathtaking, but it's often uniquely rewarding (yes, I am still thinking about *The Quiet Man*). ■

71

BELOW: Turning a circular building into an art gallery.



NEED TO KNOW

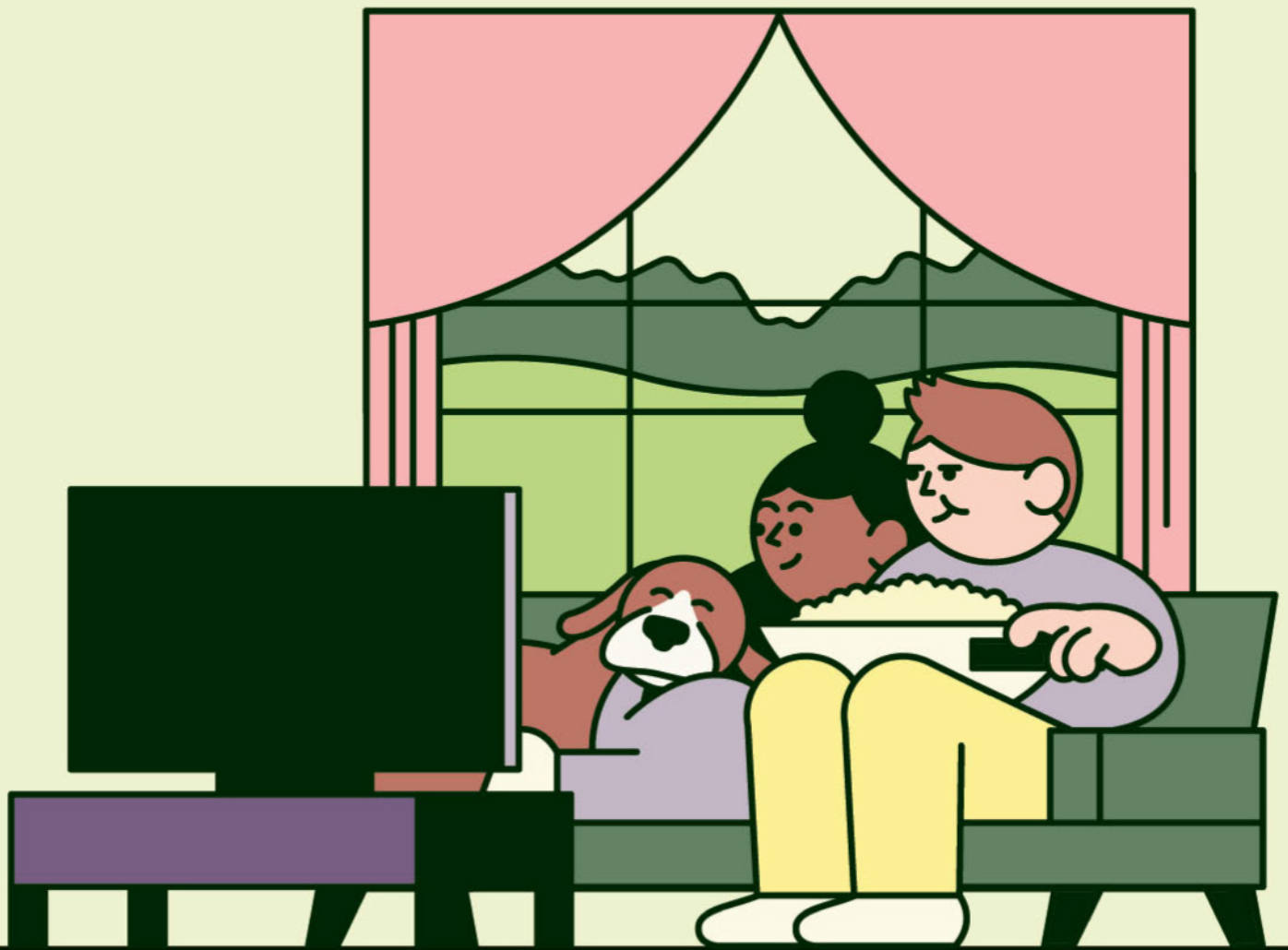
EXPECT TO PAY
£5.20

DEVELOPER
NEXT Studios

PUBLISHER
NEXT Studios

SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

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GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.go.compare).

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMING DESERVE

92

GROUP TEST

Six gaming-focused mini-PCs tested and rated.

98

TECH REPORT

Is PC gaming at fault for PS5 Pro's £700 price? Phil Iwaniuk investigates.

100

TECH TALES

Wait a minute! Have mice been the wrong shape all along?



102

THE BUILD

How to build this great gaming PC, with a part-by-part breakdown.



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

The PC Gamer-approved components guide, from budget to premium.



GROUP TEST

MINI PCs

Small but spicy, we put a selection of today's smallest PCs through their gaming paces.

By Al Bickham



Intel launched its first NUC mini-PC in 2013, so compact computing is nothing new. The ability of such tiny machines to competently run games, however, is a fairly recent development.

Mini PCs are driven by laptop-level Accelerated Processing Units (APUs), comprising a power-efficient CPU and an integrated graphics chip, and advances in the latter have helped the form-factor shrug off the cheap productivity suit and party. In this regard, AMD's 2023 Radeon 780M iGPU set a new standard.

Still, expectations should be managed. For mini PCs which rely on an iGPU for gaming, we're talking 30+fps at 1080p for AAA games at medium settings, though they really can shine with less-demanding indies. Three of the machines on test here add a discrete laptop GPU to the mix, enabling higher performance and detail settings, and even stretching to 1440p.

A mini PC won't match the grunt of a desktop machine with a decent graphics card. But if you're short on desk space and you're looking for a budget gaming machine, then read on.





AtomMan G7 PT

MINISFORUM £989 (BAREBONES)

The 1080p king of mini PCs

1 The G7 PT is larger than your average mini-PC as it packs in the Radeon 7600M XT, a discrete mobile GPU with 8GB of dedicated VRAM. This card snaps at the heels of the RTX 3060, and is married here to the mother of all mobile CPUs: the Ryzen 9 7945HX. It's a 16-core, 5.4 GHz monster which hurtles through rendering jobs and puts many top desktop CPUs to shame. It's a tasty combo that runs modern games well north of 60fps at 1080P with higher detail settings. 1440p is a bit more of a stretch though, and ray tracing murders the framerate at any

resolution. The G7 PT's cooling totally tames heat and keeps things agreeably quiet, and while your mileage may vary on the looks, it boasts a modest footprint when mounted in its vertical stand.

The barebones version is priced at just under a grand, and while you can assemble a more performant machine for the same money, the G7 PT's compactness is impossible to match with a self-build.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Insanely powerful CPU
- Solid 1080p performance
- Forget ray tracing

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 9 7945HX / GPU: RADEON 7600M XT / RAM: UP TO 64 GB DDR5 / STORAGE: UP TO 2X M.2 NVME SSD

UM790 Pro

MINISFORUM £349

Our 1080p budget pick

2 The UM790 Pro from Minisforum is a couple of years old now, but oddly enough that works in its favour. Powered by AMD's Ryzen 9 7940HS – 8 cores, 16 threads, 5.2GHz and with the Radeon 780M iGPU tickling the pixels – it's no slouch. Apart from a tiny speed-bump, AMD's 7th and 8th generation Ryzen APUs are virtually indistinguishable, so there's very little downside for choosing a machine with a 7th-gen Ryzen chip. And being a slightly older model in Minisforum's lineup, it works out a lot cheaper than more recent releases. It's a competent

contender at 1080p, with framerates that come within a gnat's-whisker of Geekom's newer AX8 Pro for less than half the price. And while it's appreciably larger, it also runs cool and very quiet indeed. Capable and near-silent cooling is definitely one of Minisforum's strong suits. All of which makes the UM790 Pro great value for money. Pick it up barebones, hunt for discounts on DDR5 and M.2 storage and away you go.

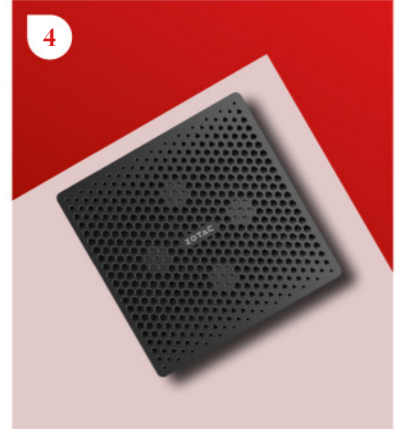
PC GAMER VERDICT

- Quietly competent
- Packs the Radeon 780M iGPU
- A little fiddly to open and upgrade

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 9 7940HS / iGPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: UP TO 64 GB DDR5 / STORAGE: UP TO 2X M.2 NVME SSD



**A TASTY COMBO THAT
RUNS MODERN GAMES
WELL NORTH OF 60FPS**



Retro mini AM02

AYANEO **£479 (BAREBONES)**

Classy, cute and capable

3 Styled to resemble the original NES, complete with hinged, USB-concealing front hood, the Retro Mini AM02 is a joy to behold. The little LCD touchscreen on the lid is a nice addition, displaying system diagnostics and enabling you to switch between three preset CPU and GPU power configs. It's powered by AMD's Ryzen 7 7840HS and the excellent Radeon 780M iGPU, and can hold its own at 1080p, where more demanding modern titles will see upwards of 30fps and lighter indie games far more.

Ayaneo's Ayaspace interface bundles all your games into a

single library and works great with a gamepad. It also enables you to tweak the power configs. Dialling up the CPU and iGPU clock-speeds brings real benefits, and you can customise the cooler's fan-curve.

While the 7840HS is rated to draw up to 54W, the Retro Mini limits this to 47W to keep things cool. This means it only reaches 4.7GHz out of its 5.1GHz, but it's still more than performant enough at 1080p.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Delightful retro design
- The perfect emulator box
- Could use a little more power

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 7 7840HS / **IGPU:** RADEON 780M / **RAM:** UP TO 64 GB GDDR5 / **STORAGE:** UP TO 2X M.2 NVME SSD

Zbox Magnus EN

ZOTAC **£1,250 (BAREBONES)**

Powerful but boisterous

4 The Magnus series from Zotac has been around for a few generations now, and this particular iteration features the 8GB laptop variant of Nvidia's RTX 4070. This makes for great 1440p performance, driving modern games well beyond 60fps and at higher detail settings to boot. Paired with this is Intel's i7 13700HX with eight performance cores and eight efficiency cores. It's a blessing in CPU-intensive scenarios, and in such cases it can outperform Asus' ROG NUC, which carries the same GPU and the newer, somewhat-less-grunty Core

Ultra 9 185H. The downside is the i7-13700HX's heat output. The Magnus' cooler works overtime taming the CPU and GPU at full tilt, generating an orchestra of fan noise.

The machine comes barebones as standard, though some system-builders will preconfigure it with RAM and storage for an appropriate premium before shipping. If you can live with the noise, it's got it where it counts at 1440p.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great 1440p performance
- Easy to open and upgrade
- Quite noisy

SPECS PROCESSOR: INTEL I7-13700HX / **GPU:** RTX 4070 MOBILE 8GB / **RAM:** UP TO 64 GB DDR5 4800 / **STORAGE:** UP TO 2X M.2 NVME SSD



BENCHMARKS

Cyberpunk 2077

- 1080p, medium preset (fps)
 - 1440p, ray tracing ultra preset (fps)
- (higher is better)

Minisforum AtomMan G7 PT



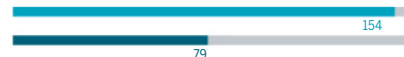
Minisforum UM790 Pro



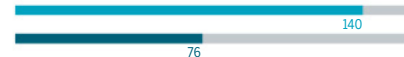
Ayaneo Retro Mini



Zotac Magnus EN



Asus ROG NUC



Geekom AX8 Pro



ROG NUC 970

ASUS £1,999

Punchy performance, punishing price tag

5 Asus is the new caretaker of Intel's NUC mini PC brand, and the ROG NUC 970 is the company's first gaming-focused offering. Combining Intel's top Meteor Lake mobile CPU, the Core 9 Ultra 185H, with 32GB DDR5 RAM and the 8GB laptop variant of the RTX 4070, 2560x1440 is its natural hunting ground. At this resolution, you can expect solid performance past 60fps at higher settings, and that RTX 4070 gets you access to ray tracing, DLSS and frame gen.

The machine has some pleasing heft and density, and mounts vertically in the included

stand to save on desk-space. We found that dropping the performance mode to Silent in Asus' Armory Crate software trimmed the fan-noise quite nicely, for a negligible performance loss. It's a nice machine, but two grand is a very tall order. The price simply doesn't reflect the performance you're getting, and with just a single 1TB M.2 drive onboard, Asus could at least have doubled the storage as a sweetener.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great CPU/GPU combo
- An great mini-PC for 1440p gaming
- That price is hard to swallow

SPECS PROCESSOR: INTEL CORE ULTRA 9 185H / GPU: RTX 4070 MOBILE 8GB / RAM: 32GB GDDR5 5600 / STORAGE: 1TB M.2 NVME SSD

AX8 Pro

GEEKOM £949

A marvel of miniaturisation

6 If you're after the very smallest PC, look no further. Measuring just 11.1x11.7x3.8cm, the Geekom AX8 pro is impressively compact, yet it manages to offer the general-computing agility of a full desktop machine.

This is down to the 8-core, 16-thread Ryzen 9 8945HS under the hood. It's a 5.2 GHz chip which comes with the Radeon 780M, the best iGPU in AMD's RDNA 3 stable. Together they make for one of the most performant mini-PCs around, driving *Cyberpunk 2077* past the 50fps mark at 1080p and medium settings, and acing any

indie game you throw its way. The spec-sheet is rounded off with 32GB DDR5-5600 and a 2 TB M.2 SSD, which is twice the storage you get in most mini-PCs. All this comes at a price though, and at £949, the AX8 Pro is one of the more expensive mini-PCs around. There's a cheaper version available packing the Ryzen 7 8845HS, but even this is £749. So if you're looking for a bargain purchase, this is not it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- The most compact PC available
- Solid 1080p performance
- A bit pricey

SPECS PROCESSOR: AMD RYZEN 9 8945HS / iGPU: RADEON 780M / RAM: 32GB DDR5 5600 / STORAGE: 2TB M.2 NVME SSD



PRO-FIT MARGINS

PS5 PRO's £700 pricing has caused a stir. Is it PC gaming's fault?

Don't worry, the printers haven't made a mistake and dropped a spread from **Console Enthusiast Quarterly** in with this issue's PCG. You are going to see the PS5 Pro mentioned quite a lot in these pages though, because its overdraft-troubling pricing has sent a ripple out across the industry that extends beyond the traditional platform boundaries.

In dollar terms, it isn't the most expensive console that Sony's ever brought to market. When you adjust PlayStations past and present for inflation, PS3's \$599 launch price works out at \$787. And that was the base console, not the upgraded latter-day version that follows in the wake of each generation-setter. That factoid in isolation makes it seem as though critics of the PS5 Pro's pricing are being short-sighted, or unduly wary of price-gouging.

In Sterling, though, that inflation-adjusted PS3 price works out at about £583. Aka: less than a PS5 Pro. And that's our first indication that there are monetary forces at work here that go beyond Sony thinking that it would quite like some more money for its next box of silicon, please. So how did we get here, and most pertinently, is it the PC's fault?

Because when you think of sharp, tear-jerking price hikes in recent gaming memory, you think of PC gaming. First came the crypto bros, buying up all the top-end Nvidia graphics

cards because it turned out they were handy for mining Bitcoins. That created an extreme scarcity of new stock, and thus a used market where second-hand RTX 2-series cards were selling for orders of magnitude beyond their MSRP.

IN ON THE ACTION

Then Nvidia itself got in on the action. When the time came to lift the veil on Jensen Huang's latest present for gamers, the RTX 3090, the retail price seemed to contain a typo. Nearly \$1,500? For one graphics card? We'd been so used to the '300 for the sweet-spot card, 700 for the money-no-object model' pricing model that it seemed there must be some mistake with the 3-series price hierarchy. There wasn't.

Was Sony giving the PC gaming world the side-eye this whole time? Did the Japanese tech giant assess that consumer appetite for absurdly expensive gaming hardware was higher than it had previously assumed? After all, the \$1,599 RTX 4090 has been selling well over the past two years, accounting for one whole percentage point of users in Steam's latest hardware survey results. That same survey indicates that the card's sales exceed those of the budget-friendly \$399 Steam Deck.

As spicy as it would be if this was indeed Sony's plan, we must factor in a few more variables. And wouldn't you know it, the modern scourge that is AI takes a share of the blame here.



Edged out

Speaking of expensive Sony hardware, the \$200 DualSense Edge has been making a compelling case for itself as the go-to PC controller for all who can afford it. Customisable in ways only an alien-tier esports pro could appreciate, Sony's gamepad marries build quality with its haptic feedback in a way that even the mighty Xbox Elite controller can't beat. It's let down only by poor battery life, but since its wireless functionality wasn't available for PC until months after it launched, you're probably used to using a cable by now anyway.



FAR LEFT: *Alan Wake 2* is among the Pro's 'enhanced' titles, but a good PC can push it way farther.

LEFT: *Helldivers 2*. Turns out you don't need a PSN account to play it on PC after all, eh Sony?

PRO TIPS *Build a PS5 Pro-beater with these components*



NVIDIA RTX 4060

Sony claims that the Pro is 45% faster than the base console, so we're guessing this £250 card is the closest PC GPU.



AMD RYZEN 7 5800X

Sony's machines use a bespoke AMD APU, but this affordable (£140) chip from Team Red will give you equivalent grunt.



16GB RAM

Easy one. £25 will get you a 2X8GB DDR4 kit to match the Pro's specs, leaving a little coin left for – well, everything else.



DUALSENSE EDGE CONTROLLER

For a mere £200, your hands can be tricked into thinking they're operating a Sony console. Sleek and customisable.

Tech companies have been running around like Black Friday shoppers, trying to secure the silicon for AI development, and increased demand and subsequent unit scarcity has sent graphics hardware prices soaring at OEM level.

BUT CAN THE H800 RUN CRYSIS?

Prices for Nvidia's non-consumer data centre H800 GPU have reportedly topped \$70,000 per unit in China as AI companies rush to buy up the hardware necessary for developing their products. Nvidia doesn't release the prices of its non-consumer cards, but reports indicate a sharp increase in what they're changing hands for since 2023.

Not that Sony was ever considering whacking a data centre GPU into its latest Pro console, you understand. Rather, the point is that as an OEM hardware builder, the landscape that Sony finds itself in is much more competitively priced than usual. Given that the console business model previously depended on selling hardware units at a loss and then making back the money later from software sales, it's a problem when the hardware suddenly costs more to assemble.

And that's another area of possible PC culpability: software sales. The rise of subscription services like Game Pass and the prevalence of live service games whose developers want you to play their game and nothing else, forever, until the heat death of the universe, has shifted the paradigm for the whole industry. However, it'd be a tenuous argument to claim that the software piracy that once ran rampant across PC gaming is directly responsible for Xbox Game Pass. It's a distant influence,

perhaps, like the Knack were to Nirvana. Otherwise, the PC gets off the hook on that charge.

Sony's official explanation for the pricing is characteristically non-specific: Wi-Fi 7 functionality, an improved SSD and more powerful graphics hardware capable of ray tracing are the chief culprits driving up the price, according to senior principal product manager Toshi Aoki. While it's true that all those hardware spec improvements cost money to implement, they don't represent anything unprecedented. The PlayStation's Pro variant has always

offered higher performance. It's always cost more money than the base machine. And the product managers have always been able to point out particular specs in order to justify that.

No, what's changed is that a high-end gaming PC now costs well over double the price that Sony's asking for the Pro. A lot of us have spent more than double its MSRP on a graphics card alone,

before we even get started on the rest of the componentry, peripherals and screen. PC gaming has normalised spending more for the privilege of higher performance in recent years, and that's bound to have an impact on the pricing practices of all platform holders and hardware manufacturers.

And unless Jensen's feeling generous by the time RTX 5 is ready, that normalised price premium isn't going away. We can expect to see higher prices on nicer things exponentially, until someone reaches the tipping point and a particular GPU, console or subscription service actually fails to sell. Until that point, remember that we've collectively voted for this reality with our wallets. ■

Phil Iwanik

WAS SONY GIVING THE PC GAMING WORLD THE SIDE-EYE THIS WHOLE TIME?

ENGELBART'S BEST

Have **MICE** been the wrong shape all along?

Ergonomics. We think about it when we sit in an especially comfortable (or uncomfortable) chair. We give it a moment when we wrap our hand around a nicely shaped mouse. And then it leaves our sphere of awareness again, to make room for CS2 callouts, the names of Doom WADs we downloaded in 1997, and figuring out what was actually going on in *Alan Wake 2*.

Which means we don't often stop to consider the longstanding design conventions that govern what a computer mouse looks like. And nor did I, if we're being honest with each other. Until one late-evening YouTube rabbit hole took me to a video called 'I Built the World's Comfiest Mouse'.

The resultant 3D printed peripheral that YouTuber Play Conveyor creates is... striking. It's almost unrecognisable as a mouse, and looks more like something HR Giger would have been happy to put his name to. Where once there was only one simple tablet-shaped object, a tangle of ripples and protrusions now surrounds the operator's hand.

This, says the YouTuber, is the comfiest shape they could find. And while the video is in fact an ad for the 3D printer he creates said mouse with, and so we should sprinkle just a dash of salt on such claims, it certainly inflames the imagination to consider that the shape of the gaming mouse is only partly about ergonomics. At this point, it's at least as much about tradition.

The earliest computer mice were made of wood. There, I said it. Deal with that mental image. A big chunk of varnished wood, the hard edges barely sanded down, sitting so tall on the desk that the user's hand no longer touches terra firma, by today's standards it looks like an instrument of punishment and coercion more than a peripheral.

Inventor Douglas Engelbart evidently wasn't losing sleep about wrist strain when he revealed his creation to the world on December 9, 1968. Having spent as long as five years developing what he called an "X-Y position indicator", he was far keener to demonstrate the underpinning technology than the ease of use.

And it was indeed impressive tech for the time. According to the patent, this new wooden marvel was "an X-Y position indicator control for movement by the hand over any surface to move a cursor over the display on a cathode ray tube, the indicator control generating signals indicating its position to cause a cursor to be displayed on the tube at the corresponding position".

And while that sentence was clearly constructed to simulate the effects of having a stroke, it did also lay a blueprint for every computer mouse that followed. Over subsequent decades the shape and construction materials changed to allow for easier operation, and fewer splinters. Plastic was the ideal shell material, it was decided. Two buttons should occupy the front portion, for selecting objects highlighted by the cursor. The colour? Anywhere on the spectrum from grey to slightly beige grey.

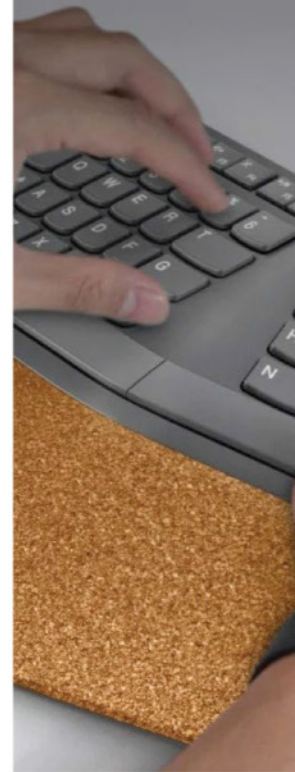
Another concession to functionality was the fact that a mouse needed to house a great big tracking ball. Before optical sensors, these weighted rubbery spheres rolled around on a surface and provided movement info that would be interpreted by internal sensors.

VERMIN-TIED

Finally, a cable. The very fact that they became known as 'mice' owed to the fact that connection cables protruded out of them like a mouse's tail, which Englebart says led to people informally referring to his creation as a mouse.

Fast-forward to 2024, and we don't need many of those founding principles any more. Optical sensors replaced

A TANGLE OF RIPPLES AND PROTRUSIONS NOW SURROUNDS THE OPERATOR'S HAND



PHIL IWANIK

We did wonder why roaming freelancer Phil had spent the last month building a papier-mâché cast of his own hand and ensconcing it in modelling clay. Now we know. It's quite a relief, honestly.

BRAVELY DEFAULT *Four essentials for every modern mouse*



BLACK FINISH

It's sleek. It's serious. It hides the years of hand-smeg you've allowed to build up on it. Plus, every other peripheral you own is black so it matches the setup.



AMBIDEXTROUS SHAPE

Yeah. Can't really knock this one too much, can we, Southpaws? But must the specific lefty-friendly shape always be exactly that of a 2002 IntelliMouse?



ONE SMALL SPOT-UV LOGO

Or if you must, a white one, but always in the exact same place at the bottom of the mouse, just by your wrist. If produced before 2018, RGB is allowed here too.



ONE UNREACHABLE/IMPRACTICAL BUTTON

"That'll be handy. I'll map it to throw grenade or reload or something." Six years later it's awaiting its first input.



trackballs, USB wireless receivers did away with cables, and input switches aren't restricted to LMB and RMB. Yet the vast majority of mice still look pretty similar to the ones that turned up with a PC in the mid-'90s.

Logitech, at least, is willing to roll the dice with some avant-garde shapes in the name of ergonomics. The vertical Lift mouse is quietly beautiful when you look at it, and impressively daring in its shape. Lenovo's Go is also striking and pretty, and dispatches with convention to find a better hand position. But they're not marketed as gaming mice, instead cordoned off in a specific 'ergonomic' field. Only Quadraclicks' RBT dares to mention gaming and ergonomics in the same sentence, and perplexingly enough it looks entirely different to not only standard gaming mice, but all other ergonomic models.

Which draws one to the inevitable conclusion: are we putting up with sub-optimal mouse shapes for gaming, simply because that's what gaming mice have always looked like? Because, if so, it's definitely time for more manufacturers to join the fray and chase down the RBT. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



ABOVE: Lenovo's Go. Looks like fine art made of corkboard. Probably not much good for *PUBG*.

LEFT: Quadraclicks' endearingly baffling RBT.

Will someone please win a CS2 tournament with one of these so that they become acceptable to use?



THE BUILD

A glass window allows us to gaze upon the clean-cut components inside this PC

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £2,979

1

CASE



HS 420 VGPU

Havn **£270**

Havn is the new kid on the block. Its first product is the HS 420, which means a lot is weighing on this PC case being exceptional. Thankfully, it is. A single sheet of glass makes up the side and front panel, offering panoramic views of the GPU mounted vertically inside. To keep this case

from highlighting your dreadful cable management, it comes with heaps of wide channels and cable ties to keep it looking neat and tidy. Even if you're the type of person to cram your PSU cables into one untidy ball, you can hide it all away inside the rear chamber.

2

GRAPHICS CARD



RTX 4080 Super 16GB Aero OC

Gigabyte **£1026**

Plenty of power for 4K gaming but just a little more sensibly priced than an RTX 4090.

3

PROCESSOR



Core i9 14900K

Intel **£437**

Intel's top chip delivers top gaming performance in swathes but high temps are the norm.

4

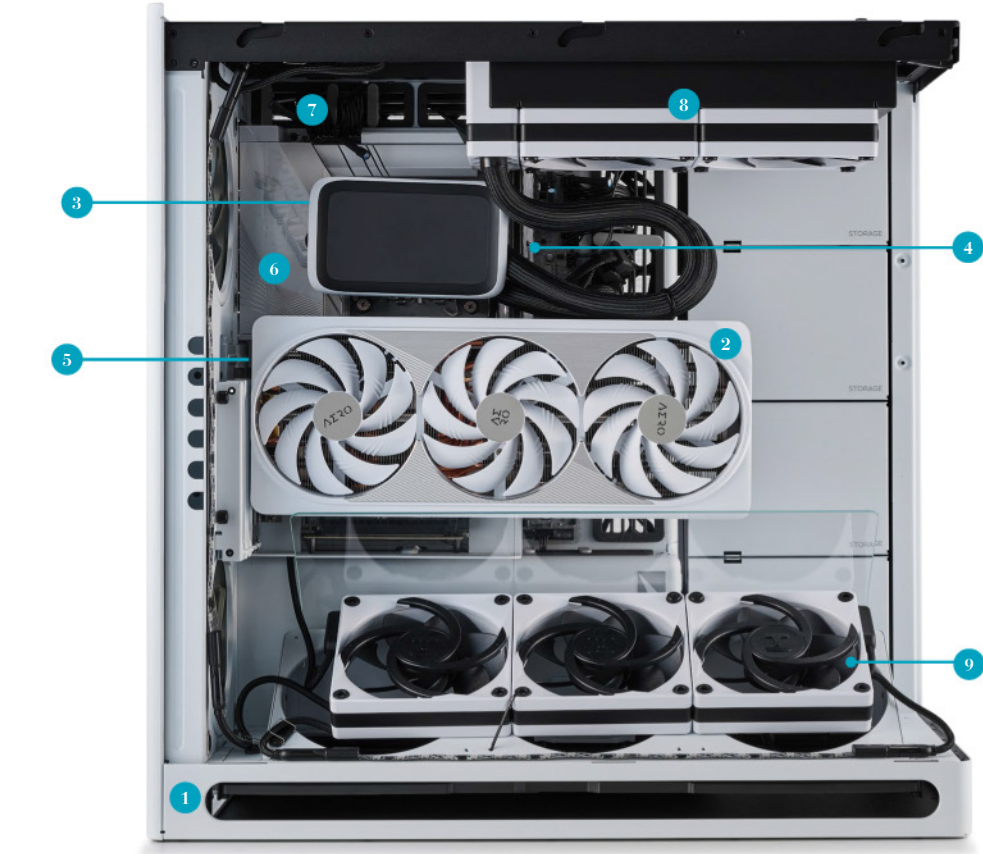
MEMORY



Manta XPrism 32 GB DDR5-6200

V-Color **£98**

I picked this kit for the dummy DIMMs but my choice of cooler stopped me from using them.



9 FANS/COOLING  Thicc FP12 Hyte £80 These magnetically attached fans make for an easy build and combine easily with the light strips I've included.	8 COOLER  Thicc Q60 Hyte £289 This CPU cooler practically comes with a mobile phone attached. It has RAM and an operating system.	7 POWER SUPPLY  Aorus P1200W 80+ Platinum Gigabyte £222 This PSU comes with a programmable screen wasted on this dual-chamber case.	6 MOTHERBOARD  Z790 Aorus Pro X Gigabyte £320 With a white finish, plenty of ports and capable cooling for a Gen5 SSD, this was the perfect fit for this build.	5 SSD  T700 2 TB Crucial £237 I've opted for a Gen5 SSD for top performance, but it is an expensive, and unnecessary, option.
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YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

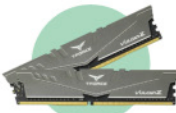
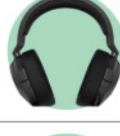
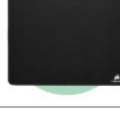
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,027

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £11 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £170 With ten cores, six of them the Performance kind, this Raptor Lake Core i5 is fantastic value and a great all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £249 AMD delivers what we need for 1080p gaming at a solid price. AMD claims it'll do over 350fps in <i>Rocket League</i> , which is a lot.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200. This is the sweet spot for RAM right now, as DDR5 can be expensive.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £90 Say it with me now: never skimp on the power supply. This is the minimum recommended for the Radeon GPU.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £67 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape and 8,000 DPI optical sensor delivered in a sleek shell, this wired mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,529

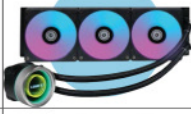
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £170 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £244 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £370 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card here.
COOLER		Freezer 36 Arctic £24 It's cheap yet effective – you can't ask for more than that. With two fans and four heatpipes, it'll go at up to 1,800 rpm.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £73 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £210 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,798

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £700 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £134 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £229 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,349 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £190 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha Wireless HyperX £135 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“The War Within itself has kept me coming back most evenings too”

WORLD OF WARCRAFT remains my jailor, and I couldn't be more pleased about it

There are two immutable facts you should know about me: I will always find a way to mention my dog in pretty much every conversation (done!), and I will always come back to *World of Warcraft*. Usually at the start of the new expansion, but this time I actually returned to Azeroth at the start of the year, and it's maintained its hold over me month after month. It is a prison from which I will never escape.

Dragonflight ended up being one of my favourite expansions, up there with *Wrath of the Lich King* and *Legion*, but the changes that Blizzard has made for *The War Within* have ensured that the typical burnout has yet to appear. Previously, I'd get a few months out of *WoW* before its

FRASER BROWN



THIS MONTH
Chilled out underground with my new earthen buddies.

ALSO PLAYED
Thanks Goodness You're Here,
Star Wars Outlaws

repetition and the allure of other games would inspire me to cancel my sub, but the expansion's arrival has kept me busy and engaged.

The Warband system has caused my alt obsession to flare up again, and even now, when I have so much new stuff to explore, I keep running legacy raids in search of new transmogs from the army of characters I have waiting in the wings – many of them created in the wonderful *Mists of Pandaria* Remix event, which let me get from 10-70 in an evening. Dressing up my toons in

TOP: He looks grumpy, but he's having a lovely time.

the most fashionable clobber has always been a major impetus for the hours I spend in whatever MMO I'm dabbling in at any given time, and more than ever before *WoW* really caters to this style of play.

SKYRIDING SKILLS

The War Within itself has kept me coming back most evenings too. The new zones are a delight to zip through on my mounts, and now that nearly every flying mount gets to take advantage of skyriding, travel has never felt so good. Journeys between quests are no longer chores: they're part of the appeal.

JOURNEYS BETWEEN QUESTS ARE NO LONGER CHORES: THEY'RE PART OF THE APPEAL



Just hanging with the (undead) crew.

Most of my time questing and going on delves has been spent on my Death Knight, always one of my favourite classes, but lately my love for it has been so much stronger thanks to the new hero talents. Bloody hell, they're good. I don't really care about the meta, it's all about the class fantasy for me, and this is where *The War Within's* talent additions really excel. I mean, I get to fight on horseback now, and I don't know how I ever lived without this option. The 'knight' part of Death Knight has been, finally, fully realised.

Surprisingly, I still have a lot of the expansion to get through. One change I've made to the way I play *WoW* is that, while I still play a lot, I'm playing a bit more responsibly. I used to just devour expansions like I was being chased all the way from start to finish. Now I'm treating it like a holiday, sauntering around, dipping into the bits that seem neat, and not putting pressure on myself to reach some arbitrary goal. It's certainly helped me avoid getting sick of it.

Maybe I'll get back into the more serious stuff later: the metas, Mythic+, maybe even some ranked PvP, but for now I'm just chilling underground with the Earthen and having a grand ol' time. ■



Leliana bringing the pain.

“Leliana decapitates a darkspawn”

Delving into the Deep Roads in **DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Reclined on the Anvil of the Void while reading *PC Gamer*.

ALSO PLAYED
Doom (2016), *Doom* (1993)

Ah, the Deep Roads, my old friends. I see you're still as drawn-out and frustrating as ever. Good job, then, that I've got a dual-wielding warrior queen at my side in the form of Leliana, who continues in my most recent playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins* to be my MVP. Barely a fight goes by without Leliana emerging literally coated with enemy blood and with a body count to her name that surpasses anyone else in my party.

Right now, for example, my two-handed sword-wielding hero Natasha looks to her left only to watch as Leliana, specced here as a dual-wielding rogue, brutally decapitates a darkspawn, its head severed from its body in one blow and a fountain of its blood pouring forth over everyone in the vicinity. Leliana attacks so much faster than my other party members, including warrior Alistair and the apostate witch Morrigan, and hits so much harder seemingly thanks to her rogue-ish critical blows from flanked positions, that she carves through the Deep Roads'

darkspawn and other denizens like a knife through butter.

A WEARY ROAD

And that's a good thing, as I was never a fan of the Deep Roads section in *Dragon Age: Origins* and, today, that remains the case. As such, having this warrior queen on-team to speed up our progress through this long underground series of tunnels and caverns, filled with seemingly endless hordes of enemies, is very welcome. Yes, sure, maybe the Deep Roads is more replayable in terms of fun than the Fade-based sections of the game, which hold very little enjoyment in terms of replay value in my opinion, but the Deep Roads are far longer, and far more drawn out.

I can see what BioWare was going for with the Deep Roads, a proper old-school, combat heavy mega dungeon that required multiple gameplay sessions to navigate through. And, sure, when you first play it, you suck it up and feel a real sense of accomplishment at its end. But with little to break up the myriad of combat encounters along the way, on replay it becomes far more of a grinding slog, a part of the game to be endured, rather than enjoyed. ■



My party's warrior queen.

“I’m sure that will fetch a nice sum of fake coin in this game of pretend”

Keeping up with **FIELDS OF MISTRIA**’s version of Dungeons & Dragons

Forget Critical Role, *Fields of Mistria*’s residents are the latest band of adventurers whose campaigns I’m eagerly tuning into every week. The farming sim has been my latest Steam Deck mainstay, its old-school magical girl vibes being right up my alley. It’s got everything you expect from the genre: growing crops, descending mines, cosying up to the locals.

One of its more unique features is the weekly Friday Night at the Inn event that – you guessed it – occurs every Friday evening in *Mistria*’s Sleeping Dragon Inn. Everyone piles in and separates into groups: you’ve got the fine wine appreciators at the bar, folk who do everything from card games to life drawing tucked away at the back, and a party of Dungeons & Drama gamers taking up the large table at the front of the venue.

While I’ve enjoyed seeing what the other groups get up to, the Dungeons & Drama lot are the reason I drop everything as soon as 5:30pm hits just so I can get to the Inn for their 6pm start time. I get to witness

▶ **MOLLIE TAYLOR**



THIS MONTH
Let my crops wilt to see what the bard would sing about next.

ALSO PLAYED
Final Fantasy XIV,
DJMax Respect V

each person introducing themselves: sweet plant-obsessed Celine takes on the role of a druid, charismatic travelling merchant Balor is a thief, while general store manager and Certifiable Dad Holt becomes Bad Brad the Bearded Bard.

CRITICAL HIT

Over the next few Fridays I eavesdrop on incidents like Adeline’s wizard excitedly zapping the king to death while Balor’s thief loots him for his crown and shoes, reflecting, “I’m sure that will fetch a nice sum of fake coin in this game of pretend”. Bad

I DROP EVERYTHING AS SOON AS 5:30PM HITS JUST SO I CAN GET TO THE INN

Brad the Bearded Bard attempts to chime in with a tune, to which the DM Eiland interjects with a claim that the king cast a silencing spell right before his death.

The campaign wraps up after four Fridays, with Balor’s thief coming out with all manner of Dungeons & Dragons-ish terminology to the rest of the party’s surprise, cobbling a bunch of bonus stats together for one final hit and saving what was almost a wipe during the final battle.

I thought that was the end, until the next Friday (and a new season) rolled around. To my surprise, there was a new campaign starting! This time with a new DM, new adventurers and a new campaign to get stuck into. I’m currently halfway through, and I can’t wait to see what the autumn and winter Dungeons & Drama adventures bring.

I’ll admit that I’m not much of a D&Der in real life, but getting to live vicariously through these virtual characters is great. Part of me wishes I could join their fun, but for now I’m happy being a spectator. After all, I fear my crops would go unwatered if my farmer became a full-time roleplayer too. ■



FAR LEFT: I don’t think any of these words are in the Bible.

LEFT: There’s always that one D&D player with the ‘kitchen sink’ character...



A big boy did it and ran away.

“This is an underdog story set in a world of injustice and inequality”

Overthinking and overidentifying with **STAR WARS: OUTLAWS**

I never wanted to be Han Solo. I was very young when I saw Star Wars for the first time, and his type of misbehaviour was completely alien to me. Why wouldn't you do the right thing, straight away? Don't get me wrong, I was happy he shot first and all, but my Star Wars journey was different. I was the good farm boy turned hero, who became a one-handed zero, before dropping his lightsaber and refusing to fight.

A lot of midi-chlorians have flowed under the bridge since then. The Jedi in the stories that followed became overpowered, oversaturated and more about war. All those good intentions leading to the dark side. You often get to be a problematic space wizard in gaming, but I've yearned to play something divorced from the Force, something with lower stakes. The problem here is in the name – *Outlaws*. I'm still Lawful Good. Even now, can I be a smug and smarmy chancer? A gangster? Do I really want to be a scoundrel? Main

▶ **MATT KILLEEN**



THIS MONTH
Finally found a protagonist to match his talents.

ALSO PLAYED
Doom (2016), *EA FC25 Beta*, *Rome 2: Total War*

protagonist Kay Vess fixes all that, because she's rubbish. She's no good at this stuff, at all.

OONTA GOOTA, SOLO?

Kay's fast-talking is limp and hapless, her confidence just incompetent bluster and while she can shoot, things have already gone wrong if she's pulling out that blaster. Her deaths are legion, her successes luck and her reputation a mistake.

She's not a scoundrel by choice. The galaxy is messed up and run by

THINGS HAVE ALREADY GONE WRONG IF SHE'S PULLING OUT THAT BLASTER

varying flavours of monster. She's just getting by, and I can get behind that. This is not a power fantasy. This is an underdog story set in a world of injustice and inequality. More critically, she's still that same little girl trying to get her mother's approval on the streets of Canto. Pet notwithstanding, she's utterly alone. Solo, in fact. I can sympathise. I know that feeling. I want things to get better for us. We deserve more.

It's her character that allows me to forgive the game when, *RDR2* style, it rips my agency away so bad stuff can happen, because she was likely to screw up in any case.

The lack of a decent tutorial feeds into this. I'm seeing the game world as she is. What can I do? How can I progress, with no clue what I'm doing? We're pretty sure that there's nothing doing in that cantina, not really, but we're driven by a hope for better. There will come a point when I'll see through the systems and appreciate that there really isn't anything in that bar. But things will be OK. I mean, the Rebel Alliance owes me, right? ■

METAL GEAR SOLID MASTER COLLECTION VOL 1

Finally, MGS2 and 3 ports worthy of the name. *By Joshua Wolens*

I never thought I'd write these words, but you gotta hand it to Konami. In the year since the first *Metal Gear Solid Master Collection* debuted to an, ah, mixed response, the devs under producer Noriaki Okamura have been steadily beaver away at its many issues. We got actual 360-degree analogue control in *MGS1*, fixes for launch issues that prevented players from downloading international versions of the games, and even a pause menu in *MGS2*. Imagine!

But the best was yet to come. Konami has released 2.0 patches for *MGS2* and 3, adding new resolution options that bring internal resolution and upscaling options to make the games look a lot less muddy on modern displays. In other words, the studio has done what has been the job of dedicated modders up until now.

Just pop into the options in each game's launcher before you start playing and you can choose between Original Mode (how the games looked at launch last year) and Adjusted Mode, which will switch the game's internal rendering resolution up to 1080p and set the upscaling anywhere from 1080p to 4K. It affects cutscenes as well as moment-to-moment gameplay.

Friends, I'm not on PC Gamer's hardware team, so don't take my own testing as declarative or exhaustive, but it looks great to me. I've booted up both *MGS2* and 3 on my own 4K television with all the new options enabled and they both look sharp as a tack, especially compared to the smeary, muddy experience you got on high-res screens before today.

I tried them on Steam Deck too, and they look great there as well. It's taken almost a year, but my layman's opinion is that these two games have

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 24 October, 2023	DEVELOPER Konami
PUBLISHER Konami	LINK konami.com

finally got PC ports worthy of their legend, just what I wanted to see when I launched them for the first time last October. They're not flawless just yet: players report a few lingering crunchy audio bugs that Konami hopefully gets around to fixing, but frankly, compared to where these games were at launch the difference is night and day.

The graphical improvements are the headline item, but they're not the only thing in the patch. Both games have also got new gamepad settings that will let you rebind your controls, as well as a new layout for keyboard users. In *MGS2*'s case, that comes

with new mouse support, letting you ready, aim and use your weapon in first-person view.

POUR SOME SUGAR ON ME

I don't want to pour too much sugar on Konami. After all, the games really ought to have been in this state when

THE GRAPHICAL IMPROVEMENTS ARE NOT THE ONLY THING IN THE PATCH

they launched, rather than nearly a full year after, but as an *MGS* sicko I'm genuinely thrilled to have versions of these games that feel actually definitive. My long-delayed *MGS3* replay can finally kick off now that I can bear to look at the game on my television. Plus, I can't be the only one who's now a lot more optimistic about *Volume 2* of the collection. Okamura has hinted that the next set of *MGS* ports will finally bust *MGS4* out of console prison, and if it's in a great state on day one? I'll be happy.

Of course, opinions might vary when it comes to *MGS1*. Where *MGS2* and 3 are native ports of the Bluepoint remasters, *MGS1* is the original PS1 game running in a barebones emulator, and it hasn't received a 2.0 patch like its sequels. That means you can still find a better experience of that game by setting up your own instance on a PS1 emulator.

Personally, *MGS1* runs well enough that I'd be mostly content recommending it to anyone just looking to play the game, but I certainly wouldn't object if Konami saw fit to put out a comparable whizz-bang patch for the original 3D *Metal Gear* game. I'm sure the devs can cobble a patch together out of currently existing technology. ■

FOX PATCH

Where each Master Collection game stands



METAL GEAR 1 + 2
Unlike the later games, the MSX *Metal Gears* have been in a pretty good state from the start.



METAL GEAR SOLID
MGS is playable but its status as an emulated PS1 game makes it a different beast to patch.



METAL GEAR SOLID 2
MGS2 is downright sharp, and has even fixed bugs that are still in the Bluepoint remasters.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3
The best *Metal Gear* is now better than ever, thanks to the same suite of upgrades that *MGS2* got.



ABOVE: Snake is finally, appropriately chiselled of jaw.

LEFT: *MGS1* is still a little chunky.





WEIRD MODS

Play Guitar Hero as Lincoln, cos you can. *Joshua Wolens*

Mods are the lifeblood of PC gaming. Consoles can keep their pomp and highfalutin talk of convenience, whatever that is, I'm busy turning *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* into a six-way gang war, vaporising myself in the prologue of *Fallout 4* and turning *Skyrim* into a boundless playground of fetishes so hyper-specific they'd give the Borgias pause. I mean, I'm not doing that last one, actually. Don't put in the magazine that I'm doing that last one.

Thing is, though, some mods are so mind-bogglingly niche that you can't really justify building an entire piece just to cover them. It means you end up with a long list of weird and wonderful mods that you'd like to write about but can't. But on the walls of the PC Gamer offices hangs

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Various

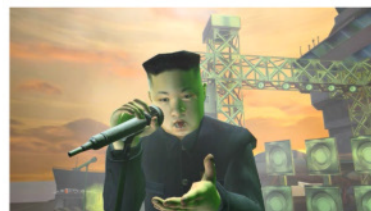
DEVELOPER
Several

PUBLISHER
Many

LINK
nexusmods.com

a bronze commandment, "When life gives you a backlog of several relatively small articles you want to write, turn them into a multi-page roundup." I'm not quite sure why it's there: the plaque is extremely heavy and may be damaging the wall it's hanging on, and it could have just been a Post-It note. Regardless, I'm taking the advice to heart. So here's a few of my favourite hyper-specific mods I never got a chance to write about.

As Souls games go, I think I had the easiest time of all with *Dark Souls 2*. It's got some tough fights, but it's the game I had least trouble breezing through with my weird hex-throwing



ABOVE: On guitar: Abe. On bass: Abe. On drums... Abe!

LEFT: He's the world's best singer, according to him.



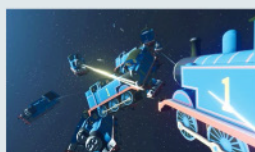
TANKS FOR EVERYTHING

Thomas the Tank Engine in other games



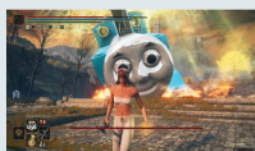
SKYRIM

The Really Useful Dragons mod replaces those scaly flying monsters with Thomas.



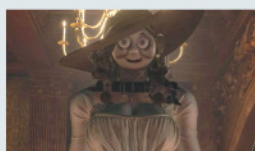
STARFIELD

Replace your ship with Thomas? Naw. How about you replace every ship with Thomas?.



ELDEN RING

Replace the dragon Agheel with Thomas. Don't worry, he still breathes fire!



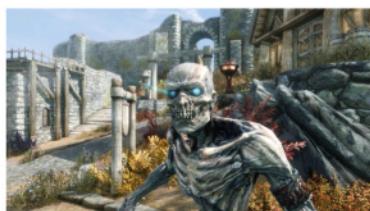
RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

Yes, it's what you think it is. Lady Dimitrescu is now Count Theodora. Yikes.



LEFT: Mario and Luigi finally take on *Resident Evil 4*. Woohoo!

ABOVE: He's just... someone's dad, you know?



guy. Well, time to amend that. And where others may trifle with enemy stats and AI, modder Half Grown Hollow cuts to the quick with *Dark Souls 2: Australia Edition* by simply turning Drangleic upside down. Everything is harder in Australia, so problem solved. *Dark Souls 2* is now more challenging than its successor and predecessor games and all we've done is turned the camera on its head. Good luck figuring that one out, bucko.

SHRED, HISTORICALLY

Next, meet WorseTYou, a modder with bright eyes, a full heart, and one overriding mission: to let you play *Guitar Hero World Tour* as everyone who ever happened. At least, I assume that's their mission, owing to the fact their Nexus user files page includes 119 mods at time of writing that let you play as anyone from Someone's Dad to Barney Calhoun.

But enough about that. The real meat here is the dizzying number of current and historical world leaders the modder has crammed into the game. Want to play as Abe Lincoln? Teddy Roosevelt? Um, Joseph Stalin? Everyone knows Kim Jong Un has a song in his heart, now he can finally let it out.

Is it in good taste? No. Is it necessary? Also no. Yet I'm glad I live in the same world anyway. Let every mad dream find fulfilment. Let every delegate to the 13th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party learn to shred.

Next: "Just be happy that this extremely niche mod exists for your extremely niche problem," reads 1Nye's description of the *No Draugr Hair (or Beards)* mod for *Skyrim*, a mod which removes Draugr hair (and beards) from *Skyrim*.

What problem would that be? Draugr hair, of course. The scourge of our times. The word for a fear of corpses is necrophobia. For fear of hair? Trichophobia. Is this *Skyrim*'s first and only mod aimed at players who suffer from trichophobia? Sure, man, that works. Failing that, 1Nye offers the explanation that you could consider it an immersion mod, if you're into that. "Can also be considered immersive if you think hair would still be intact on 500-year-old Nords," says the creator.

Of the nine comments the mod has earned in its lifespan, just one is from someone saying they thought

they were the only person who was "VERY BOTHERED" by whatever this problem is. Imagine what an amazing day it was for that person when this popped up in their feed. There's feeling seen, and then there's whatever that is.

WAR IS SCARY

The scent of cordite, the clamour of artillery fire, the blood and the smoke and the guys from *Five Nights at Freddy's* popping up randomly to scare you. War is a nightmare, and something we ought to have grown past as a society, but which remains as a sad holdover from another age (2014, release year of *Five Nights at Freddy's*).

That's the case in *Five Nights at Hearts of Iron 4*, a mod/crime that you can currently find over at the *Hearts of Iron 4* Steam Workshop



EVERYONE KNOWS KIM JONG UN HAS A SONG IN HIS HEART

page. It mashes up the characters of *Five Nights at Freddy's* and the unrivalled destruction of the greatest conflict in human history.

Once you've subscribed, "Every day you've got 1% chance for a jumpscare," in which one of *FNAF*'s many animatronic horrors will appear atop a devastated continent to howl blue murder at you. In times of war, the law falls silent, but Freddy Fazbear speaks up.

OK, I think we're far enough into the article now that the Nintendo legal team won't read this far. SupremeLeader777 spent 2023 turning almost every character in *Resident Evil 4* into almost every character from Mario. There's Krauser Bowser, Luigi Sera, and a new title screen 450% more effectively haunting than the original.

I think what I love about this is that I cannot fathom a single reason anyone would ever seek it out, let alone create it, and yet here it is, stubbornly existing – even expanding – because someone, somewhere, had a weird urge and the means to fulfil it. This is what modding's about, baby. It's about infesting Mario with parasites. ■



GET STARTED IN

FROSTPUNK 2

Save New London from the icy apocalypse... again. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

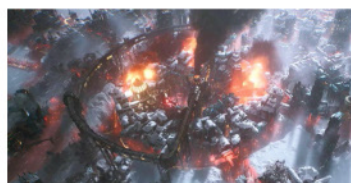
DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS

Tips: pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/frostpunk-2-tips-and-tricks

Heatstamps: pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/frostpunk-2-heatstamps



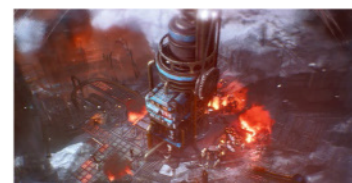
DISTRICTS

1 Rather than the buildings of the first game, *Frostpunk 2* is all about districts. These production centres extract and produce resources, house your population, or create frostland teams you can send out to explore the wilderness.



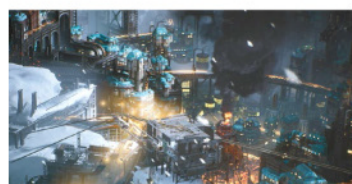
BUILT TO LAST

2 Your city still has buildings, though, and these are a key part of boosting a district's efficiency. You may have to expand a district first via its menu – and you've researched that building in the ideas tree – you can place it in the district.



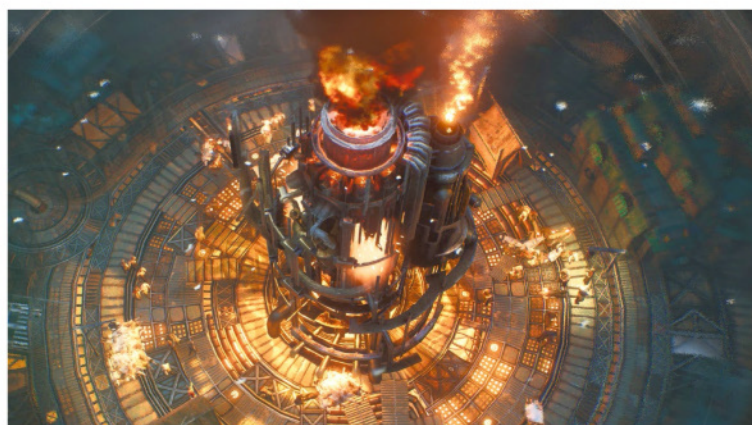
TOILING MASSES

3 One of New London's most vital resources is workforce; the percentage of your population that's fit for labour. You can recruit more workers by exploring the frostland and increase your population by making sure they have favourable living conditions.



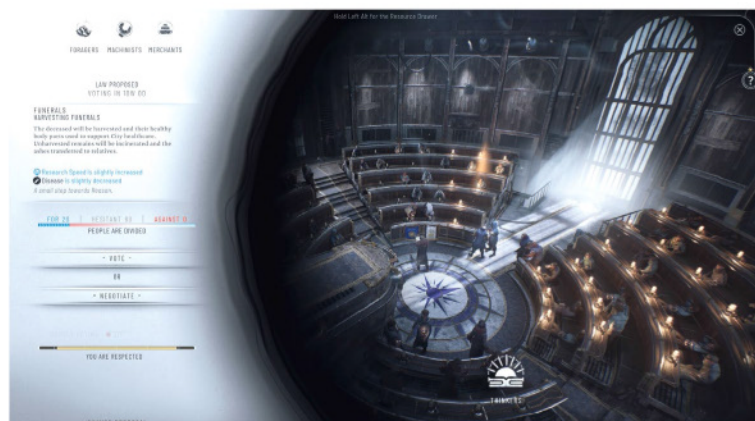
HUBS

4 Another way to stretch your workforce that little bit further is via hubs. I mentioned district placement was important, well, these special storage buildings reduce the requirement of adjacent districts, meaning you can reuse that workforce elsewhere.



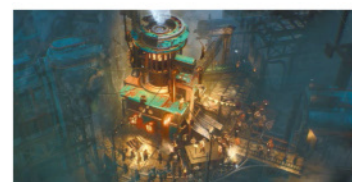
HEATSTAMPS

5 This local currency is another resource you'll need to do just about anything in *Frostpunk 2*, but, researching new tech in the ideas tree. Heatstamps are a people-centric resource, so the only way to get them is by naturally taxing the population.



LAW AND ORDER

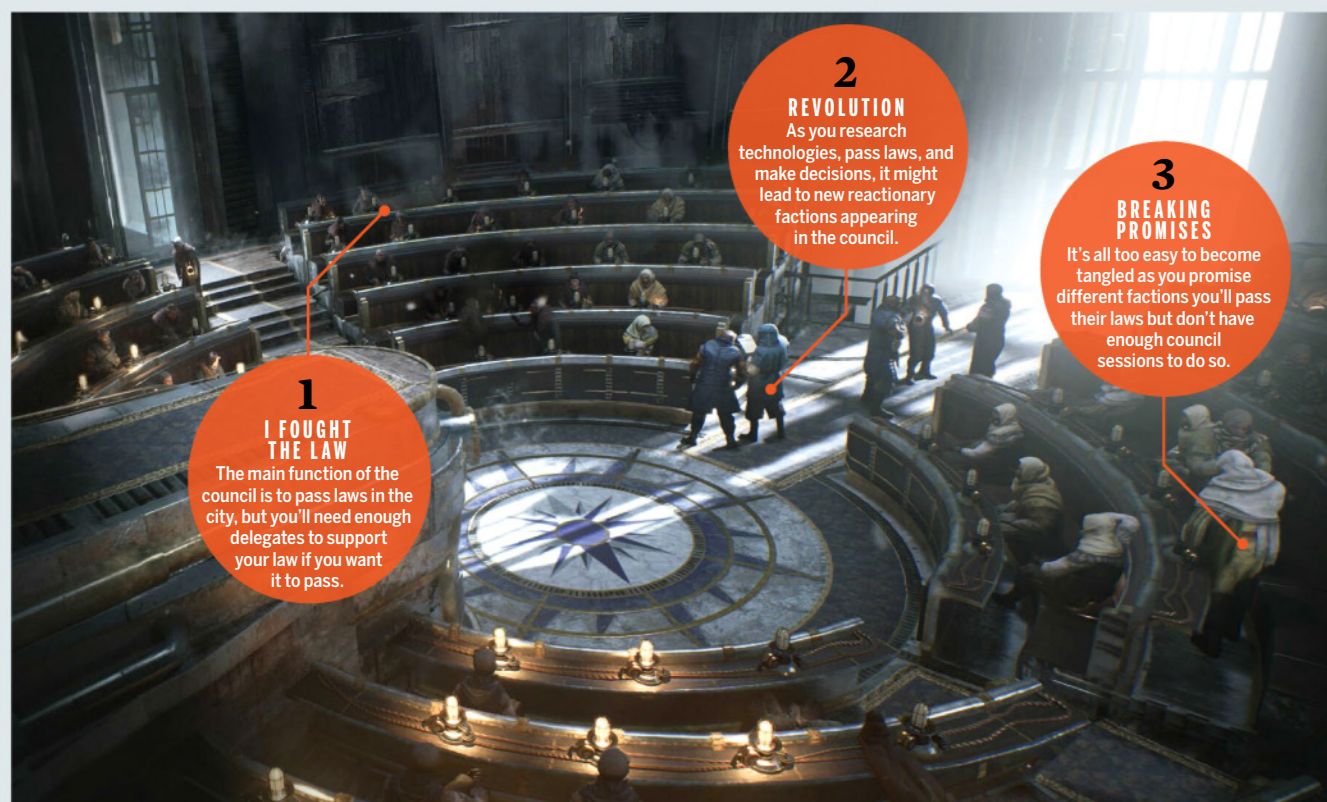
6 One such method of appeasement is passing laws that factions approve of in the council. Each faction will have a particular set of core beliefs that will influence the laws they'll support, so it's important to pass a range of laws.



LITTLE LUXURIES

7 If you want to retain a high heatstamp and a happy population, goods are one of the key resources you'll need to stockpile. A steady supply of goods also decreases crime – since your citizens aren't shanking each other over the last cigarettes.

I LOVE DEMOCRACY *Bend the council to your will*



1

I FOUGHT THE LAW

The main function of the council is to pass laws in the city, but you'll need enough delegates to support your law if you want it to pass.

2

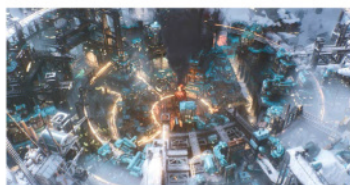
REVOLUTION

As you research technologies, pass laws, and make decisions, it might lead to new reactionary factions appearing in the council.

3

BREAKING PROMISES

It's all too easy to become tangled as you promise different factions you'll pass their laws but don't have enough council sessions to do so.



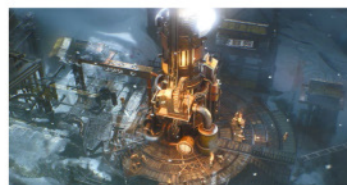
INTO THE SNOW

8 Another early step is setting out to explore the frostland region around your city. Use the frostbreak action to get to the edges of the map and build logistics districts. These will provide frostland teams you can send out to find survivors, resources and even sites for outposts.



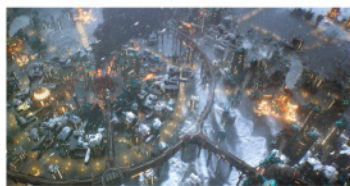
MAKING TRAILS

9 There are some slight barriers to exploring frostland, such as the threat level and trails mechanics. Threat level means the danger of sending frostland teams to explore that area, but you can reduce it via buildings like the Scouts' Headquarters.



HOARDING MATERIALS

10 While frostland provides a wealth of materials, so too can the resource nodes around your city. If you research the Deep Melting Drill technology in the ideas tree, you can place this building in an extraction or food district and watch as it provides a trickle of resources.



SQUALOR AND DISEASE

11 Depending on which technologies you research and buildings you construct, either squalor or disease are likely to rise. Squalor is usually a side-effect of machine-centric buildings and is combated with a surplus of buildings like the filtration tower.



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

12 Tackling crime is a bit trickier than simply building hospitals and filtration towers, since it requires a special human resource similar to frostland teams: guard squads. You can provide guard squads through researching.



GAINING VALUABLE WORK EXPERIENCE IN ALPHA PROTOCOL

PART 1

Even top secret intelligence operations offer internships. Well, they do if your uncle works in the back office. *By James Nouch*

Young people today have it tough, from climate breakdown to the skyrocketing price of once-egalitarian confectionary brands such as Freddo, Curly Wurly and even the humble Fudge. But for many, getting started on the career ladder will be their most pressing concern, and that's certainly the case for Mikey T.

Fortunately, our young hero is about to get a break, as he's just been accepted as the first ever intern at Alpha Protocol. Sure, the position may be unpaid, but the three-month placement will give Mikey a valuable insight into the inner workings of America's most secretive intelligence agency. How did he get the gig, you ask? Don't worry about it! It was a highly competitive and totally fair process, I can assure you. OK, so Mikey's uncle works as a back-office member of the Alpha Protocol support staff, but that's irrelevant. Who said it was nepotism? It's definitely not nepotism.

After all the excitement of landing the gig, it's fair to say that Mikey's first day gets off to a ropery start. Every *Alpha Protocol* campaign begins with your character waking up on a gurney in the agency's operations centre. Mikey, drugged and disoriented, wakes to the sound of a ringing phone. Answering it initiates a video call with Alpha Protocol intelligence analyst Mina Tang, and represents our first chance to engage in some networking.

It's at this point that you get your first taste of *Alpha Protocol's* conversation system, which lets you select from three flavours of response to any given line of dialogue: professional, aggressive and suave. Now, I don't know about you, but 'suave' isn't the first adjective that comes to mind when I see a 19-year-old with a soul patch, so that feels like it's off the table. Aggressive doesn't fit the bill either – it's a rare breed of intern who manages to double as workplace bully. That leaves professional, which feels just right for an enthusiastic young go-getter like Mikey T.

In the conversation that follows, Mina explains that our drugging is part of an 'indoctrination' (oh, that's just fine then, is it?) and that a guard is en route to put us back to sleep via the medium of tranquillisers and/or fists. You'd think the professional response here would see us

requesting an urgent meeting with HR, but instead we professionally use a fire extinguisher to smash our way out of the room and professionally choke out a patrolling guard. We go on to very professionally shoot no fewer than ten men with a tranquilliser gun before the tutorial mission comes to an end.

MEET THE TEAM

With all that unpleasantness behind us, Mikey T is keen to meet his new colleagues, and pathologically eager to make a good impression. First up, we head to the weapons range to finally meet Mina in the flesh. Desperate to

WE GO ON TO VERY PROFESSIONALLY SHOOT NO FEWER THAN TEN MEN

develop some level of workplace rapport, we start thinking about conversational responses that move beyond the purely professional. Lucky for us, we have a special fourth set of dialogue options to choose from.

That's because I set Mikey T's background as 'recruit' as part of the character creation process, thinking it would accurately convey his utter lack of occupational experience or relevant training. I'm hoping that this choice will open up conversational alleys that better reflect Mikey's priorities (eg, "Do you know where the laminator sheets are kept?" or perhaps, "Would you consider giving me a recommendation on LinkedIn?") but most of them just seem to be variations on the theme of, "What does that acronym mean?" To make matters worse, the 'recruit' background also means that you start the game with no skill points to spend whatsoever, to reflect your status as a total dunderhead.

In spite of all this, Mikey's naïve charm soon advances our relationship with Mina from 'neutral' to 'liked'. If only it were this easy and this heavily signposted in real life. Alan Parker is our next appointment, and this greying veteran of the Alpha Protocol team seems to like the cut of our jib (because I correctly guessed he would like it if

we kept saying professional things). He delivers our espionage training before we head to meet Sean Darcy for our final test: the gadget briefing.

It turns out that Sean Darcy is a spectacular arse. He's antagonistic, prone to jealousy and doesn't like to play by the rules. As a goodie-two-shoes on a mission to endear himself to every workplace contact he meets, this represents a serious challenge for Mikey T. We put in a strong performance on the training course – surely this will make Darcy change his tune. If by 'change his tune' you mean 'propose a wager that leads to you being attacked by wave after wave of vengeful guards from the tutorial mission', you'd be eerily correct. Still, Mikey takes the bet and only hospitalises a handful of guards. A partial success!

THE RULES

1. You're working for exposure. You can't spend any money.
2. Do things by the book. Interns don't get to break the rules.
3. Talk to everyone and be sure to make a good impression.



✕ The last meeting on our whistle-stop tour of Alpha Protocol's headquarters is Yancy Westridge, the formidable chief of the agency's operations. He briefs us on our mission, berates us for being a rookie, and sends us on our way before we can get in so much as a "thank you for this opportunity, Mister Westridge sir". With that, it looks like we're heading to Saudi Arabia.

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

We're out on our first real mission, and there's a problem. Mikey keeps finding bag after bag of money. Our target is an international arms smuggler named Nasri, and it seems that he's so wealthy he leaves duffel bags of large denomination bills around his base in much the same way that I leave coffee mugs in every room of my house. Now, in an ordinary playthrough, this wouldn't pose a problem – after all, cash can be used to purchase better arms, armour, gadgets and intel to advance your missions.

But Mikey T isn't your ordinary agent. He's working at Alpha Protocol for exposure and he's terrified of breaking any regulations. I glumly add the bags to Mikey's inventory even though I know that the rules of the playthrough forbid us from ever spending the money. Perhaps Alpha Protocol HQ has a lost property department where we can hand all this in?

The cavalcade of thousand-dollar-duffels aren't our only problem, either. It turns out that Mikey is incredibly loud and conspicuous. He can't seem to make it five metres in this place without Nasri's guards spotting him, presumably wondering why the US government would send a teenaged klutz to infiltrate their reinforced munitions compound. To make matters worse, my handler for this mission is Westridge himself. This is not how you make a good impression with the big boss.

Through a combination of determination, luck, and less-than-professional levels of violence, we eventually

BELOW: They say you should dress for the job you want. I'd say Mikey wants to be frontman of an early 2000s ska band.

MAKING CONTACTS

Meet the Alpha Protocol team



YANCY WESTRIDGE

The head honcho, and also therefore the person that Mikey is most likely to get tongue-tied around. As such, he avoids Westridge.



MINA TANG

The first person you meet in the game, and the only one that seems to take issue with new hires being drugged and pummelled. She also lends Mikey a stapler.



SEAN DARCY

Mikey accidentally ate Sean's lunch on day one (a bean-heavy chilli) and hid the evidence. He lives in fear that Sean will discover this deception.



ALAN PARKER

Alan projects strong paternal vibes for Mikey. So much so that Mikey absent-mindedly called him dad during a briefing and blushed so hard.

make it to our target. Nasri's elite guards don't go down without a fight, but before I know it, I have the man himself at gunpoint.

The tension mounts as I consider the options available to me. Westridge seems to think that killing Nasri is a good way to hinder the flow of illegal weapons and may help protect innocent people. Executing a suspect in cold blood is definitely not very intern-like, though, so I'm keen to hear other options. Nasri is next to pop up with an idea: let him go and he'll definitely give us some money. Given Mikey's desire to do things by the book (and the fact that his pockets are bulging with unspendable duffel-bag cash) Nasri's pitch doesn't gain much traction.

Mikey's choice is clear, then. We arrest him, all the while beaming with pride for being a good intern. I wonder whether Nasri might let us list him as a reference on Mikey's CV when all this is over.

UNDER THE RADAR

Mikey T has come a long way. Now that he has a few missions under his belt – and quite a few skill points slotted into the stealth attribute – his usefulness in the field has really skyrocketed. There are still occasional missteps (most notably when I absent-mindedly interact with a computer console in a warehouse full of advanced weaponry and inadvertently fire an anti-aircraft missile at a wall), but these don't seem to harm Mikey's reputation within the Alpha Protocol team as a polite young man.

The only difficulty is that *Alpha Protocol's* campaign doesn't really support the kind of pure stealth approach that might best suit a dedicated rules-follower like Mikey. As such, we're left with no choice but to occasionally choke, punch, or delicately shoot an enemy guard or two. On the plus side, Mikey's superiors seem delighted with his progress. They decide that the time has come to set our sights on Ali Shaheed, the





IT'S HERE THAT THE CAUSE-AND-EFFECT MECHANICS OF ALPHA PROTOCOL POP UP

wealthy backer of terrorist outfit Al-Samad and our ultimate target in the region.

It's here that the occasional cause-and-effect mechanics of *Alpha Protocol* pop up to throw us a bone or two. It turns out that by arresting Nasri, we can expect Shaheed's guards to be less well-armed than they might otherwise have been. Before I can get too excited about this victory for non-violent due process, I note that we'll also benefit from the fact that Mikey killed an entire squad of Shaheed's elite guards in a previous mission. The fact that I don't remember which guards this windfall refers to probably isn't a good sign of Mikey's record as a master of infiltration. Nevertheless, I'm hopeful that these boons will make up for the fact that we've been unable to spend a penny on gear or intel in this playthrough.

As it happens, the final mission of our Saudi Arabian roadtrip is a shambles from start to finish. Mikey gets lost in a graveyard, is repeatedly spotted by cameras, and somehow manages to find tens of thousands of dollars even though I am specifically trying to avoid it. It's reached the

point where I worry he's at risk of being over-encumbered by the sheer weight of paper money he's carrying.

As Mikey nears his objective I spend ten minutes trying to sneak my way past Shaheed's most trusted lieutenant, only for a cutscene to interrupt proceedings at the last possible second. I can only watch as Mikey unceremoniously boots the lieutenant off a bridge with all the stealth and finesse of a town crier on a bouncy castle.

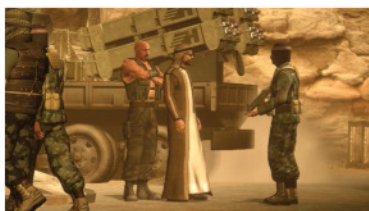
I wonder if we might yet avoid detection, but when the lieutenant's body literally bounces off the bonnet of the lead vehicle in Shaheed's convoy, I realise that the game is probably up. At this point, all those hard-earned stealth skillpoints count for little as I note the sudden abundance of rocket launchers and grenades on every available surface between Mikey and Shaheed's heavily armed Stryker attack vehicle. The explosive-strewn battle that

follows is a test of Mikey's physical fortitude and my fraying patience, but our shared perseverance is finally rewarded when our rockets open up the Stryker like a cantaloupe in a vice.

Shaheed stumbles out, and Mikey prepares to revive the by-the-book routine that worked so well on Nasri. Once again, *Alpha Protocol's* action-packed cutscenes have other ideas. Missiles rain down on our position. As if that wasn't bad enough, it seems that we're the target. There's a mole in the team.

And that's where we leave Mikey T. Can he clear his name? And will he ever finish that laminating? Tune in next time to find out. ■

ABOVE: I did try dressing Mikey in more field-appropriate attire, but the armour plating came at the expense of making him even worse at sneaking. It had to go.



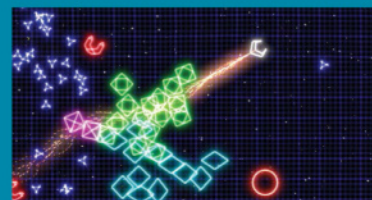


INSTANT RESTARTS

If I'm going to have to fail over and over, don't make me wait. *By James Nouch*



LEFT: Short stages plus rapid restarts enable ludicrously exacting levels of difficulty. There's got to be a mathematical formula in there somewhere.



As Gravelord Nito once again smushes me into a bright and chunky salsa, I let out a long and low groan of despair. It's not that I can't face the thought of fighting him again. If anything, I'm so frustrated with this bony lout that I'd like nothing more than to go toe-to-skeletal-toe with him all over again. No, it's the thought of the trudge from the closest checkpoint back to his boss room that fills me with dread.

This journey from bonfire to boss chamber is known as the runback, and in Nito's case it's a minutes-long gauntlet through a network of dimly lit tombs. To make matters worse, the route is peppered with every variety of skeleton bastard imaginable.

As I glumly contemplate the journey ahead, I can't help but feel deflated. That determination I felt just moments ago gives way to a sense of grudging obligation. I swear I'll get my revenge, Nito – just give me five minutes to commute to your gaff. Sorry I'm late, traffic was a mare.

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

Now, if any of that sounds like pleading for a lower level of difficulty, let me be clear: I will accept any level of in-game challenge if the time between failure and restart is sufficiently fast. I will hurl myself against impossible odds 1,000 times over if I am only ever seconds away from a fresh attempt.

From the demanding platforming of *Super Meat Boy* and *Celeste* to the murderous action of *Superhot* and *Katana Zero*, there's something alchemical in the instant restart's ability to transform the frustration of defeat into the fresh resolve of a new attempt. Say you clumsily clatter off a platform while sprinting your way through a stage in *Neon White*. You might spend as little as half a second festering bitterly on the indignity of

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RESTARTS

The many times I've hammered the retry



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER

The two-minute timer on each level encourages a kind of ruthless perfectionism.



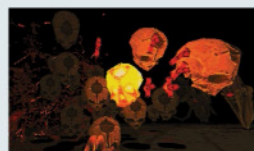
TRIALS 2: SECOND EDITION

Watching a ghost rider streak past you into the distance is always a bruising moment.



NUCLEAR THRONE

Even long load times can sap the energy from otherwise intense experiences.



DEVIL DAGGERS

This id-inspired throwback offers pure arcade thrills in oppressively small arenas.

your failure before slamming the space bar to return to the action.

Some games go even further and even faster. You're sat on the edge of your seat, scared to breathe as you close in on an all-time high score in *Geometry Wars*. Eventually (some might say inevitably) you fail like a

I WILL HURL MYSELF AGAINST IMPOSSIBLE ODDS 1,000 TIMES OVER

chump. But rather than asking whether you want to start a new run, *Geometry Wars* takes the choice for you. You're playing again, it seems to say, with all the presumptuousness of a friend buying you another round while you were in the loos. *Geometry Wars* doesn't care that you had a train to catch. Before you know it, you're halfway to another brilliant run.

FAILING FAST

And then there's the aesthetic value of the instant restart. *Hotline Miami*, for instance, is a game with a particular depiction of violence – one that emphasises its suddenness and horror. As you storm through a building full of enemies, then, each swift and gruesome kill ramps up the intensity. But when you do fall to enemy fire, your death is just as whiplash-fast and unceremonious as those of the henchman you've been battling. You're spat back to the building's entrance. The soundtrack doesn't even skip a beat.

Super Meat Boy, meanwhile, uses similar component parts to create an altogether different vibe. Once again, your deaths are abrupt, accompanied only by a squelchy sound effect and a whirlwind respawn. But when you do eventually beat a stage, your triumph is celebrated with a montage that superimposes each of your attempts on top of one another. Each of these short videos tells a story.

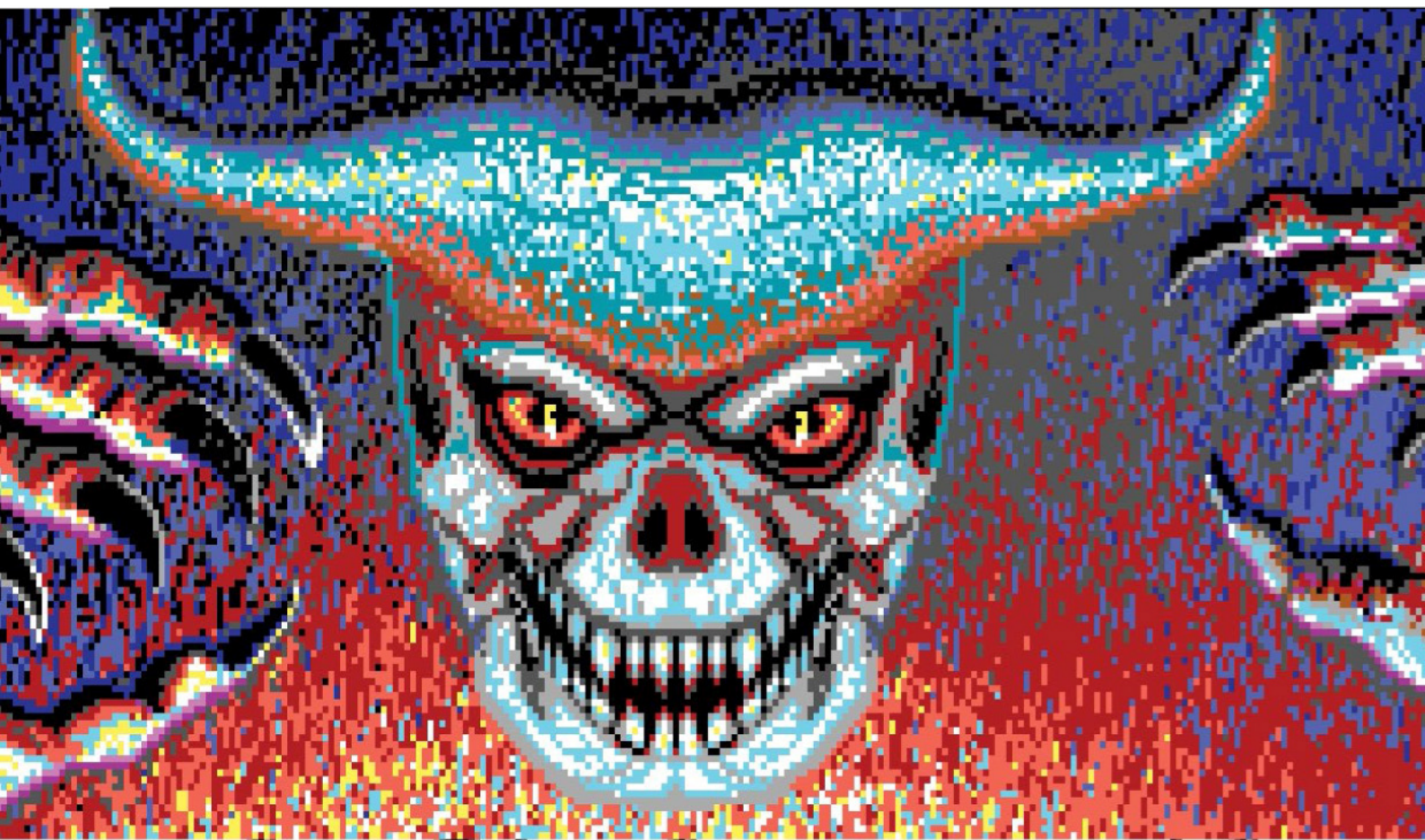
I'd be lying, though, if I said that the appeal of instant restarts was all about their ability to reinforce themes of narrative or gameplay. They also just tug at the parts of our brains that crave short, sharp bursts of effort and reward. It's the bit of you that says 'one more go' over and over again. I suspect it's closely related to the neural structure that will tell me I don't have time for a 90-minute movie but will lead me to watch 11 episodes of 30 Rock instead.

Even the designers at From Software have steadily moved towards an embrace of the relatively quick restart. *Elden Ring* and *Sekiro*, for instance, place their checkpoints much closer to boss chambers than their predecessors ever did, so a runback that might have once taken three minutes is now pared back to just ten seconds. They may not be instant, but they're largely free of nightmare skeletons, at least. I call that progress. ■



LEFT: Playing the same short level over and over again can bring out nuances and texture you would have otherwise missed.





CURSE OF THE AZURE BONDS

These classic games haven't aged badly, but I sure have. *By Jody Macgregor*

Years before *Baldur's Gate* came along, the CRPGs made in the Gold Box engine, including *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, were my introduction to the Forgotten Realms. Which is why I'll always associate the setting with women in impractical armour and names that can't be taken seriously. In *Curse* that's the priest Gharri of Gond, though a few years later *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* would introduce the unforgettable Lunit Bdufe a name that makes Drizzt Do'Urden seem downright mundane.

The Gold Box games also introduced me to factions like the Zhentarim and the Red Wizards of Thay, two of the organisations in *Curse of the Azure Bonds* trying to control you via the magic tattoos of the title. Nothing can

ever just be blue in a fantasy novel when it could be azure or sapphire or cerulean, right? I think Hoodoo of the Blue Tattoo would have been an even better name myself.

Curse kicks off when you wake up with magic tattoos and a month of missing memories. When those tattoos compel you to attack a local royal, you learn they're a medium for mind control and set out to get them removed. It's funny how that quest – to remove something that's controlling your mind – foreshadows *Baldur's Gate III*, even down to the amnesia if you play the Dark Urge.

SEWER LEVEL

The assassination attempt leads to a jail break and chase through the sewers where you encounter monsters made of garbage called otyughs. The sewer section is a highlight – not a sentence you write

TOP: The villain looks much cooler before the DM puts his mini down.

about videogames often – and one reason is that you can talk to the monsters. Some of the otyughs are jealous of their otyugh neighbours, so you can befriend them by stealing the superior piles of excrement next door. There are a handful of moments like this scattered across *Curse*, where you can cut a deal with a dark elf (but she'll only talk to you if there's a woman in your party), or avoid a fight with salamanders (but only if you choose the correct conversational tone out of a selection including haughty, nice and meek).

The other reason this sewer chase stands out is how much story's

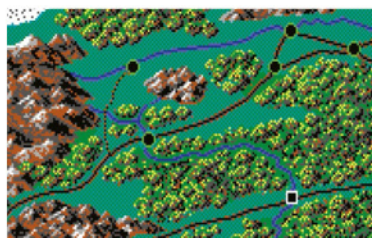
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1989

PUBLISHER
SNEG

DEVELOPER
Strategic Simulations

LINK
gbc.zorbus.net



jammed into it. There's a conflict between the thieves guild who helped bust you out of prison and a rival gang of criminals called the Fire Knives, both fighting over the prime thief real estate of the sewers. The Fire Knives were one of the parties involved in giving you the tattoos, and you stumble across the remains of their previous experiments as you rush through their base, following the trail of two other adventurers separately on the loose in the sewers. Gharri of Ghond is here to rescue a

princess like he's playing a different videogame, and Olive Ruskettle – a halfling from the novel this game is based on – is one step ahead of you in the tunnels as well.

This is *Curse of the Azure Bonds* at its peak. CRPGs at the time rarely had this much narrative going on, with exceptions like *Ultima IV*. You were much more likely to be playing a dungeon dice-and-slice than something with actual mystery and plot. It helps that it's based on a book, just called *Azure Bonds*, which

CRPGS AT THE TIME RARELY HAD THIS MUCH NARRATIVE GOING ON

TOP: Meeting characters from the books is a treat.

was nothing special but still more readable than 90% of the D&D novels – not that you need to read it to play the videogame. I hadn't the first time I played *Curse* but still appreciated when an NPC from the book would show up because they'd suddenly have more backstory and personality than everyone around them just by dint of not having been created for a videogame.

CHERISHED COMPANION

The Steam release of the Gold Box games comes with an app called the Gold Box Companion, which can be downloaded separately for other versions. It bolts an automap onto the right side of the game window so you don't have to bust out graph paper, and adds a status bar to the top that transforms into a menu of quality-of-life improvements when you mouse over it.

They include the ability to read journal entries as you find them rather than having to open up a pdf,

OLD GOLD

The best Gold Box games



POOL OF RADIANCE 1988

A sandbox classic. The original and a highlight, even if set in a town called Phlan.



CURSE OF THE AZURE BONDS 1989

The jinxed body art game you are reading about. I hear it's pretty all right. All right-ish.



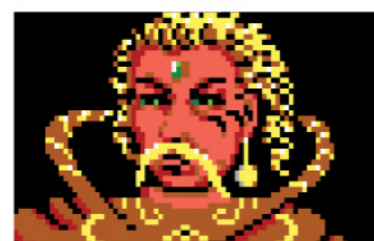
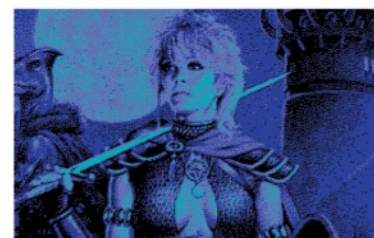
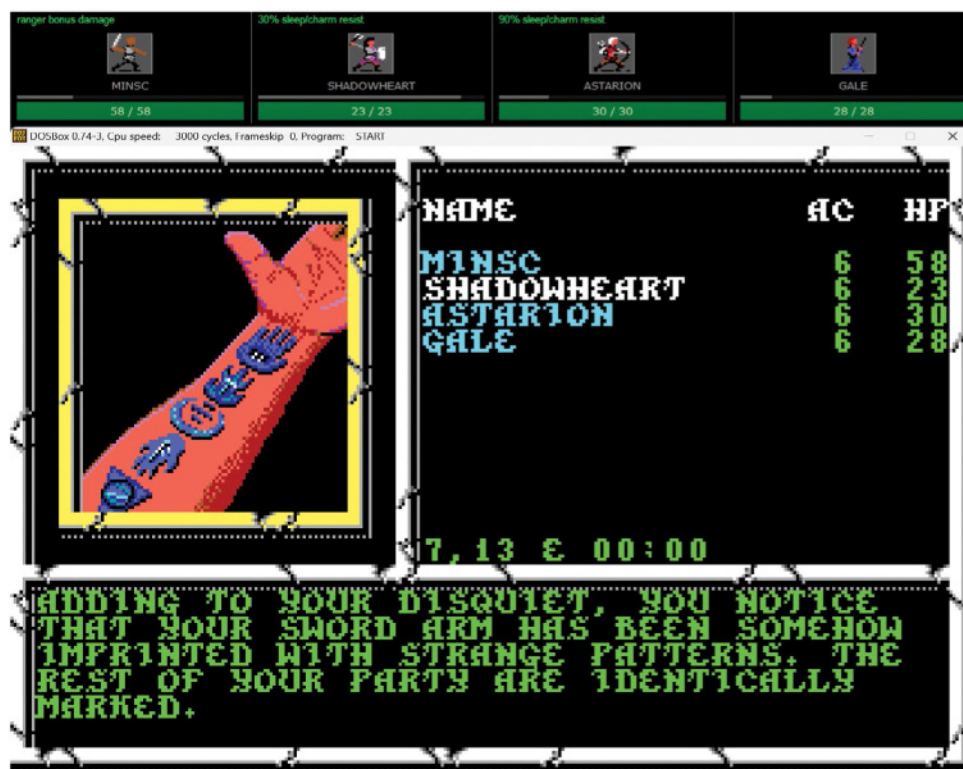
TREASURES OF THE SAVAGE FRONTIER 1992

One of the first western RPGs with romanceable companions. Also: weather.



FORGOTTEN REALMS: UNLIMITED ADVENTURES 1993

A DIY adventure kit that people are still making modules for.



because this is a game from the days when developers would save disk space by putting half the story in a book with numbered paragraphs you'd consult as you played. If you lost the thing, or your second-hand copy didn't have one, you'd never find out what Gorgax told you in paragraph 33.

An undersung hero of the Gold Box Companion is the ability to store your current list of memorised spells and then restore them at the press of a button instead of having to go through after each fight re-memorising every Stinking Cloud and Fireball you cast. But the most indispensable thing about it is

that it lets you ignore racial level limits. *Curse of the Azure Bonds* is based on the rules of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 1st Edition, which are a real ball-ache for many reasons, not least that they hate non-humans. Some classes are only available to humans, like paladin and ranger, and those that aren't are often restricted. Your cleric can be a half-elf if you like, but you'll never be allowed to go higher than level 5 – the level that *Curse* starts at.

BY THE BOOK

D&D's co-creator Gary Gygax thought of D&D as a work of sword and sorcery like Conan or the

ABOVE: Who hasn't woken up with a regrettable tattoo?

stories of Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance, which are amoral and human-centric. Surprisingly, he wasn't a fan of high fantasy like *The Lord of the Rings*, a deeply moral story about people from different backgrounds coming together to save the world, and while he put elves and dwarves in his game because players asked for them he made playing one an absolute pain in the dickhole. Fortunately, later editions of D&D ditched all that nonsense and now everyone's party is a mix of elves, tieflings and dragonborn, but back in the day D&D wanted you to eat your vegetables and be a boring human.

CREATURE FEATURE *Today's menu of monsters*



MANTICORES

Body of a lion, wings of a bat, face of an old man.



MEDUSAS

In mythology there's only one, now they're legion.



GRYPHONS

Way too proud of the bird parts. You're half-lion...



BEHOLDERS

Eh, I've beheld better. Points for being unusual.



MINOTAURS

Copy what I said about medusas and paste it.



VEGEPYGMIES

I don't know who thought 'vegepygmy' was OK.



They always stand in neat rows when I don't have a Lightning Bolt.

While some of the rules were annoying, sticking to them meant *Curse of the Azure Bonds* really did feel like playing D&D. In a time when it was much harder to find a group than it is today, *Curse* was the methadone that would cover your need for a fix. That similarity was most obvious in the combat. My preference for turn-based tactical combat probably goes back to *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, where thieves would only get bonus backstab damage on enemies who had been attacked from the front earlier that round, and timing was everything.

Some actions could take longer, splitting your turn over multiple initiative counts. When an enemy priest started praying, the next character in the turn order would get a chance to interrupt with something fast like an arrow or a Magic Missile, breaking his concentration so he'd lose that Hold Person spell. Enemies would do the same trick, and the number of Fireballs I lost because my wizard took chip damage from a random dark elf is infuriating. Area-denial spells like Stinking Cloud were the order of the day, and Lightning Bolt would rebound off walls, potentially bouncing back to strike twice. After that, the real-time-

THE ENEMIES ARE CLEARLY CHOSEN FOR THEIR LEVEL-APPROPRIATENESS

with-pause combat of *Baldur's Gate* felt like a betrayal – not how D&D was supposed to work.

THE END

The Gold Box Companion makes replaying *Curse of the Azure Bonds* more convenient than trying to finish it was when I was a kid. Back then, I never made it to the end. Now, armed with a walkthrough so I don't have to suffer through quite so many random encounters as I wander the wilderness trying to figure out where the plot picks up, I finally get to see what the back half of the game is like.

Turns out, not great. There are a lot fewer chatty otyughs and a lot more dungeon crawling. The enemies are clearly chosen for their level-appropriateness rather than to match the theme – a red wizard who is obsessed with dragons has an undead one as a pet, which makes sense, but most of his horde is made up of dark elves and efreet for no reason other than providing a

balanced challenge for your current experience total. The final boss, a spirit capable of possessing anyone, has taken over a storm giant for no particular reason except his stat block. His minions are margoyles, a slightly tougher version of gargoyles, again for no reason. Defeat them and there's a rushed epilogue, some pixel fireworks, and an opportunity to save your party so you can take them into the next game.

Which I did, after going back to my final save to remove each character one by one because that's apparently how it works. Dragging the same party into the sequel, *Secret of the Silver Blades*, isn't really doing it for me. Much as I loved *Curse of the Azure Bonds* as a 12-year-old who only owned a handful of games and didn't have any friends who played D&D, now if I want that experience in videogame form I've got *Baldur's Gate III*, *Solasta: Crown of the Magister* and a couple of *Pathfinder* games to replay. Even better, I've got a real D&D game on the go and the players have just hit level 5.

Maybe for old times' sake I'll introduce some Red Wizards and Zhentarim into my campaign. Though not the impractical armour and unpronounceable names. ■

LAUREN MORTON



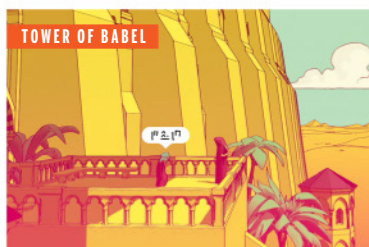
As a cosy game expert I am here to inundate the pages with saccharine pastels and games where you can't lose, plus one immersive mystery sim where you totally can fail.



FIELDS OF MISTRIA

fieldsofmistria.com

→ Inspired by '90s anime and *Harvest Moon*, this early access farm sim is easily the best thing for *Stardew Valley* enjoys this year. I've become obsessed with breeding rare cow colours, and now the only problem is that I can't decide which of its eligible singles I like most.



CHANTS OF SENNAAR

rundisc.io/chants-of-sennaar

→ My favourite cosy game of last year is an extremely stylish language puzzle game. In point-and-click adventure style you'll learn the languages of the tower's citizens through clever quests and neat interactions that really put your logic skills to the test.



TINY GLADE

pouncelight.games/tiny-glade

→ The castle doodling game everyone was waiting for is like *Townscaper* with the training wheels off. There are no goals here, only creativity, as you draw curtain walls, castles, or tiny little witch huts in a swamp. It's cottagecore-core for cosy game lovers.



GOURDLETS

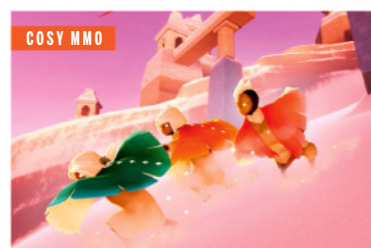
auntgames.com

→ The city-builder of cosy builders is a canvas for building worlds populated with adorable gourd people. Each Gourd is a customisable citizen and giving your gourds more things to play with unlocks new objects you can use to decorate inside their homes and buildings.



A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Lauren Morton



SKY

thatskygame.com

→ The developer of *Journey* took its flying and sand-surfing game and turned it into a live-service which shouldn't work but totally does. Minimalist multiplayer friendships and tons of small cute quests for unlockable outfits have kept me coming back to since its PC launch.



TINY LIFE

tinylifegame.com

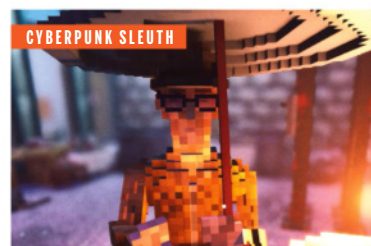
→ The only actual game like *The Sims* that exists right now is this super lo-fi little life sim where I bought an empty house, married the garbage man, and became an expert painter. It's all the building, decorating and silly life simulation of *The Sims* but in a smaller package.



MINAMI LANE

minamilane.carrrd.co

→ Is it called a city builder if you're just building one road? I think so. *Minami Lane* is part strategy and part builder in which setting up enough housing, public spaces, and perfecting the ramen recipe in your store will help you achieve goals in each of its levels.



SHADOWS OF DOUBT

shadows.game

→ One of these things is not like the other and it's the procedurally generated dystopian city mystery generator. *Shadows of Doubt* is an excellent immersive sim where you decide how to solve each mystery, whether it's stakeouts, research, social engineering, or guns blazing.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **LOOT BOX CONFIDENTIAL**

As I tried to block out the memory of Betty Sue's suicide, I realised that the past is a gaping hole. You try to run from it, but the more you run, the deeper, more terrible it grows behind you, its edges yawning at your heels. Your only chance is to turn around and face it. But it's like looking down into the grave of your love. Betty Sue had looked like my first love. And now she was dead.

Then, out of the darkness of the night, she came. The dame's name was Lily Carver and, as she told me, she was after a one-of-a-kind, real life loot box for her favourite PC game, *Overwatch*. "I simply must have the loot box, Dick," Lily entreated. "It's rightfully mine as the world's best *Overwatch* player and, what's more, I can tell you who's got it, it's that no good weasel Soberin, my biggest *Overwatch* rival. He must've heard about the box and paid a member of his goon squad to steal it off me."

The loot box's origin was unknown. Blizzard had confirmed it wasn't the source but when Lily had gone to pick it up from a dead drop site, it had then been stolen from her at gunpoint. She hadn't even had chance to open it to see what mysteries it contained. Hitting my underground sources, I got a tip-off that Soberin was a member of the Hollywood Athletics Club, so I swung by. A quick chat with the manager revealed that Soberin wasn't there, but that he had deposited an item in his locker the previous evening. A quick check of the locker revealed the loot box.

Loot box in hand I returned to the address Lily had given me, a coastal beachhouse, but as I walked in through the door I found myself face-to-face with Lily, who had a pocket pistol drawn, standing over the bloodied Soberin, who'd been shot in the side. "I'll be taking that, Dick," Lily stated, holding me up while grabbing the box. As she did, Soberin coughed out, "She's gone mad, Dick, mad, the loot box is rightfully mine, but she couldn't deal with not knowing what it contained, so hired you to do her dirty work, you've been tricked."

"Oh, shut your pie-hole, Soberin!" Lily snarled as she retreated towards a table before placing the box down upon it. "Only I shall know the truth!" But as Lily opened the box, all I now remember is a white glow emanating out of it followed by Lily's harrowing scream. When I woke on the sand, the beachhouse was a charred ruin. Of the loot box, Soberin and Lily, there was no sign.

CASE CLOSED

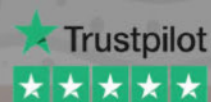
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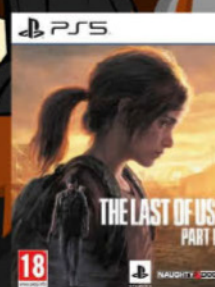
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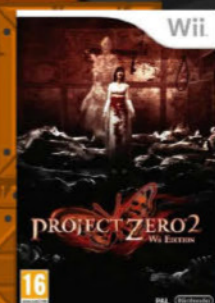
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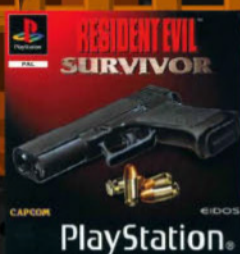
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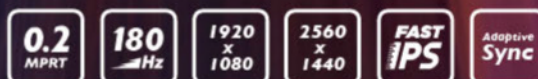
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